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“Grape, grape joy” The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (01/07/2024, First Sunday after the Epiphany)

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Let us pray, Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen, amen.

Many people have a period of time in their life that they wish they could forget. Maybe a time of their life that they don't tell other people about. Some of your friends that have known you for fewer than five years don't know what you did in your 20s and they never will know. Most of you don't know I went through this phase where I wanted to be sort of an artsy guy and college involved like a lot of jewelry, like thumb rings and stuff, a lot of gel. And that's the first time I'm coming clean. This is vulnerability here.

Maybe you had a goth phase. I had a friend who politically now is very much on the right. But in high school he protested with green peace and locked himself to a cage to protest the imprisonment of animals. And we go through these phases in our lives in our past which if we're to come out now we might find a little bit embarrassing. Sometimes it's not things you did. Sometimes it's things you didn't do. Regrets that you have. A phase in your life I saw something on Twitter recently somebody said I'm in my 40s. What are some things that you regret not doing before you reach this phase in life and people just fill the comments with all these regrets and the things that they did or didn't do. So there's a lot of things maybe in our past that we wish we could strike from the record. You know have it expunged as it were.

And one of the clearest examples I've seen of this is from the career

of Amy Grant. Now
if any Amy Grant for those of you who don't know Christian
contemporary artist and pop singer
very successful 30 million records Kennedy Center honors. But when I
say that something from her
past she would like to forget I'm not talking about her personal life
you people who know too much
about Amy Grant. I'm talking about the song that she released on her
first album. She signed with
word records right here in Waco Texas. If you're driving down West
Waco Drive and you pass an
insurance agency in a brick building whose awning is shaped like a W
it's because it used to be
the first letter of the rest of that sign on the front of the building
word incorporated. And we're
talking Russ Taff Michael W Smith. I mean the Reverend Al Green all
the greats.
Jesus is waiting. That's a little Al Green for you. Don't listen to go
look it up.
And Amy Grant the head of word records heard a demo of hers when she
was 16 and immediately signed
her to a contract at word records. Gerald McCracken and folks like
that. And on her first album released
in 1977 when she was 17 years old contained a song that I think she
would like to have expunished
from her record if she could. It is that as they say today cringey.
And it is called any guesses?
Anyone know the deep cuts from the Amy Grant catalog? Okay. It is
called grape grape joy.
I don't have a speech impediment. I did not say great great joy. I did
say grape the little fruit.
Grape grape joy. This is just a sample of this song. Are you a small
and lonely grape clutching
to the vine? Waiting for the day when you'll become the Savior's wine.
You don't become wine.
Just if you're wondering. Just I don't know what scripture this is
drawing from but nevertheless
it goes on. It gets worse or do I mean better? Don't give up hope. You
heavy laden. You don't want
to be a raisin. And it concludes there's a grape grape joy in Jesus in
the vineyard of the Lord.
I mean I heard this. This exists people. And Amy Grant is amazing.
Lead me on and even baby baby
but this is not a towering work of staggering genius. I think we can
be fair. This would be like
your high school essays getting published or something like that. And
yours nobody remembers.
But this is out there for the world. Things we'd like to forget. And
many people I see
and whom we talk to in our ministry are folks a little bit like Lady

Macbeth. Remember that play?
They made you read in high school by Shakespeare. And there she is
after doing a very dirty deed.
She's sleepwalking. This is not something that comes out in her daily
life but it's buried so deep.
So she's sleepwalking and she is seen washing her hands over. There's
no water. She's just
washing her hands over and over staring at her hands sort of in this
trance saying out, out,
damn spot. And just washing and washing and washing and she can't get
it clean.
This is why Shakespeare was really ahead of his time seeing what we
now would talk about it
unresolved trauma and moral injury and all that stuff that she can't
expunge on her own.
And there's so much of what we would like to forget or race the hard
drive from the past that
no one would ever know. And this is exactly what's happening in the
passage from the gospel of
Mark. There's four biographies of Jesus at the beginning of the New
Testament, Matthew, Mark,
Luke, John. In this year in our Sunday services we'll be going through
Mark for the most part.
And Mark is writing like he can't get it down on the page fast enough.
He always says,
immediately Jesus did this and immediately the disciples did that. And
today you see Mark talking
about the beginning of Jesus' ministry and all four gospels have this
story in one way or another.
So it's clearly important. And it's this story of John the baptizer,
baptizing along the Jordan
River and Jesus shows up to be baptized. And what's important to note,
everybody that's showing up
to John's tent revival down by the Jordan River is showing up to try
to erase something from their
past. Because he says, you know, come repent, turn for your sins and
other stories that tell this,
other versions of it in the Testament. He names specifically. You used
to do these things and
now you got to start over. And so these are all people that are
showing up to take a spiritual
bath. A lot of people want to do this. Check your social media. Right
now the ads for discounts
on noom, dry January, sign up for 28 days of yoga with Adrian. I
strongly recommend that actually.
All these people are trying to take a spiritual bath. People trying to
get clean. And I get it. I
mean we do this in church too all the time. And that's what John is
offering people there. Come to
the water, get washed and turn over a new leaf, get right with the

Lord and start fresh.

They want to put away their past. What's interesting to me a couple things and I want to say one final thing about this that I think will help you if there's any part of you that can relate to

Lady Macbeth. I want to note with you first of all how you are not alone if that's true about you.

John is like one of these crazy guys that you see around with a sign saying the end is near,

looking sort of disheveled. He's a wild-eyed, bushy bearded, off the grid living guy. And he says

the end is near, come get ready. And all these people show up, not just the high brow or the low brow

everybody in between. Sometimes we think that people that have a lakeside view or vacation

in fancy places, they are doing fine. But let me tell you scratch the surface and they are not

fine. And so those folks, the big city folks come to see John. But then also the people from the

small towns, the villages, the people who live in the double wide, not the mansion, and everybody in

between. So this seems to be something that everybody wants to hear because everybody shows up for

John. All these people line up to see this crazy guy by river and he's offering a fresh start.

Man, and people want a fresh start. So there they are. Everybody's taken a number and gotten in line.

And he's dunking them in the water and then they come out the other side. And then the weirdest

thing happens, Jesus shows up. Verse 10. Verse 9, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was

baptized by John in the water. Verse 10. And just as he was coming up with the water, he saw the

heavens turn up out this dove lands on him and he hears this voice from heaven. Beloved, I am with

you and I'm well pleased. Why does Jesus, the Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father?

God from God, life from my true God, from true God, begotten of not made of one being in the

Father. Why does he need to be baptized? What kind of spiritual fresh start does he need?

This is the key thing I want to say. And the image I want you to have here, just picture the people

going into the water of the Jordan River. We have some water from the Jordan River right there on

the table and we'll report it in the baptismal font that we're getting ready to use for this baptism.

So think of the water from there and that water is pretty and looks clean. It's a nice jar. But if you

go to the Jordan River, it's like an irrigation ditch. It is shallow.

It is not the mighty Mississippi.
It is not impressive. But all these people are lined up to get into the water with John because they want a fresh start and he's dunking them and then next, dunk, next. And so if you think about what's going on here, it's like all these people taking a spiritual bath, washing away their sins into the water of the river Jordan. So if you could see with your eyes the invisible, see the sins in the guilt and the shame and the fear and the pain and the loss and the grief, all that in that water washed off of these people like an oil slick. Or think about when your child has come in or your puppy has come in from playing in the yard after a heavy rainstorm. The first thing you do is put them in the tub and think about that water when they get out of the tub. That's what is going on spiritually with John and these baptisms. And think about that tub, think about that oil slick and think about a silk handkerchief and dipping it in that tub and what happens.

Suddenly it takes all of that into itself.
Jesus, this king of kings, this perfect son of God does not stay looking at all the sinners down at the Jordan River shaking his head. He gets into the water with them because this is the beginning of his ministry, what he came to do. We've just been through Christmas and gosh, that incarnation is neat. What a cool parlor trick for God to become a human. But he's come to do something. He's come to get in the water with us. He's come to soak up and take on all of the sin and the guilt and the shame and the fear and the anxiety and the dread and the loss and the pain and all of that into himself. And this is where it begins. Because John's baptism isn't enough.

The ax reading gets into that and John himself says, what I do is just with water, you need something more. And this is what Jesus comes to do to give us that something more to become human like you, to take on your sins, to set you free from the things that you are burdened with.

And this I hope is good news for you. Because if it's just John's baptism, we're sort of left like David Foster Wallace, this great writer, may he rest in peace, brilliant man, who suffered from depression and he wrote really beautifully and powerfully about how to suffer from chronic lifelong depression is sort of like trying to fix a broken thing with

a broken thing. You know, I've got these thoughts and these feelings that I wish I could fix, but it's all inside me. And so the thing that I would use to fix it, my thoughts and my feelings, my brain, is already broken. I'm trying to fix a broken thing with a broken thing and I just can't do it. And spiritually many of us are like that. We're trying to fix a broken thing with a broken thing ourselves. And Jesus says, that's what John's offering, go in the water, confess your sins, repent, and now don't do it again. Jesus and John and Acts say that's not enough. We need to baptism from Christ that is different. And what it is, it's not just a washing, it's a resurrection. You'll hear us say in the literature, pay attention. It's long and you'll get lost, but perk up your ears. When you hear me say, you're baptized in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ because of baptism offers. There's not just a washing, yes, but it's a resurrection. And it means you now are no longer having to fix a broken thing with a broken thing. It's not all up to you. Now it means that God is doing this work in you through you and for you. What you cannot do for yourself, it's new life. Something is actually going to happen there to lead deeper. You won't see it. But it is real. And if you are baptized, it has happened to you. You are not just washed and given a chance to try again. You are made new, new life in Christ. The old is gone. The new has come and you are set free to no longer fix a broken thing with a broken thing. But now you can bring all of that brokenness to Christ and he will do the work in you. So let us pray. All mighty God set us free, heal us, make us new. You know what we need. And so we present ourselves here to be made new. We ask in Christ's name. Amen.