A sermon preached on January 8, 2017 at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH by Associate Rector Richard Israel.

One of the most unforgettable people in my life is the Reverend Richard Sering, the founder of Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry. When Dick died, the Plain Dealer ran an editorial that began, “The Rev. Richard Sering was a giant of a man who changed lives. Whether he was helping an ex-offender coming home to nothing, or lonely and vulnerable seniors, or drug-abusing youth looking for help, Sering and his ministry stood out for more than three decades as Greater Cleveland’s brightest beacon of hope for destroyed, destitute lives.”

Despite those very moving words written when he died, Dick’s ministry was not always welcomed by the Lutheran churches of Greater Cleveland. In fact, when I met with the vestry of Grace Lutheran Church to seek their support for ordination, one of the vestry members asked me, “You’re not going to embarrass us like Sering, are you?” As I recall, this was in the wake of a non-violent protest on the campus of Kent State University when Dick and others were arrested for protesting the building of a gymnasium on the site where four students had been killed by National Guardsman in 1970.

Thankfully, as Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry’s impact in Cleveland grew over time, both Grace Church and the wider Lutheran community took pride in the ministry that Dick Sering offered. On one occasion when he was to receive an award for social justice from Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, his partner in ministry, Charles See, director of LMM’s Community Re-Entry program asked Dick, “What is the highest award one can receive from the Lutheran church?” Without missing a beat, Dick responded, “That’s easy. It’s baptism.” I think of that story every year when we observe the baptism of Jesus because it is a reminder that each and every one of us is called to ministry, not just people like me who wear a funny collar and fancy vestments.

The story of Jesus’ baptism is recorded in all four gospels, attesting to its importance. Despite the brevity of the story, it is important to note that for the first three centuries of the church, if not longer, the baptism of Jesus was a much more important feast than Christmas.

Our focus for today is Matthew’s telling of the story which differs from the other gospel writers in one key detail. Matthew is the only evangelist who includes the dialogue between Jesus and John the Baptist in which John protests that it is Jesus who should be baptizing him.

For years theologians have wrestled with the issue of why Jesus, who knew no sin, would undergo baptism from John the Baptist who baptized with water those who came to repent of their sins. David Lose offers this explanation, “Baptism for Jesus, was less about forgiveness than it was about commissioning, the inauguration of his mission and ministry and assurance of God’s presence.”
In the verses immediately preceding today’s Gospel reading, Matthew has John the Baptist describe the one to come who is more powerful than him. In contrast to John’s baptism with water, the one to come will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. “He will gather his wheat into the granary, but burn the chaff with unquenchable fire.” In other words, the one for whom John the Baptist prepared the way would initiate judgment and vindication. However, this is not to be the way of Jesus.

In our first lesson the prophet Isaiah tells of a Servant from God who would come to right the wrongs in this world, who would bring God’s justice to the nations. Commenting on this passage, Alan Brehm writes, “… I think our idea of justice is very different from the Bible. In our world ‘justice’ is something that happens in courtrooms. Justice is about arbitrating disputes and determining guilt or innocence and handing down punishments for crimes. But in the Bible, God’s justice means that the hungry are fed, the prisoners are set free, the blind receive their sight, those who are bowed down are lifted up, and the immigrants and the widows and orphans have someone to watch over them.”

In presenting himself to be baptized by John, Jesus willingly identifies with all the faults and failures, pains and problems, of all the broken and hurting people who had flocked to the Jordan River, and with us as well. Like the Servant prophesied by Isaiah, Jesus shows us that God’s desire to redeem us is so deep that he will not “break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick”. In contrast to John the Baptist’s proclamation of a righteous judge, Jesus in his baptism became the embodiment of the suffering servant who would model what righteousness really looks like.

Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler loved to tell about a time when his car broke down in Jerusalem. Sittler took the car to a mechanic to have it fixed. “When the mechanic had finished and started up the engine to hear it running perfectly he said, ‘Zadik.’ Zadik is the Hebrew word translated as righteousness. In this context it means simply: ‘it works.’ Sinners and the world are made to ‘work’ in and through the ministry of the One who fulfills all righteousness.” In asking John to baptize him, Jesus shows us his willingness to embrace that mission, to fulfill all righteousness, to be the tool by which God will lay healing hands on a broken world and make it “work”.

Robert Saler, writing in the Christian Century, asks, “When we baptize someone, what do we expect?” In my ministry I have never once seen the heavens rent open or heard a voice from above at a baptism. But Saler continues, “…the more interesting question is whether we think that, as the congregation acclaims the baptized person’s status as a beloved child of God, we in fact speak with the full authority of the heavens.” Is our faith in God bold enough to assume that authority?

One of the reasons I believe the Baptism of Jesus may have originally been more important than Christmas to the early church is that until Christianity became accepted by the empire under Constantine, many Christians came to baptism because they experienced the witness of martyrs whose faithfulness unto death brought even greater vitality to the church.
Those faithful witnesses to God’s saving love trusted unto death the affirming words of God proclaimed in Jesus’ baptism, “You are my beloved child in whom I am well-pleased.”

God’s word of affirmation recorded in all four gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism, “You are my Beloved one in whom I am well pleased”, frames our identities and experiences as well. God’s love for us is unconditional, never earned. It is a first and final word about who we are and to whom we belong. But the ministry of Jesus who bids us “follow me” keeps us from turning this love into something tame or therapeutic.

Peter Gomes describes a unique aspect of baptism in the Greek Orthodox Church, writing, “After a baby is baptized, literally still damp, the priest or bishop takes his pectoral cross and slaps the baby on its breast, so hard that it leaves a mark, and so hard that it hurts the child and the child screams.” Gomes continues, “The symbolism of the Eastern baptism is clear. The blow indicates that the one baptized into Christ must bear the cross…”, doing battle with evil as Christ did, trusting that by walking the way of the cross one will find the path to overcome evil.

As a democratic nation, we are about to witness a change in power as we transition from the Obama administration to that of President-elect Trump. In my lifetime I can’t remember any such transition that promises more dramatic change in our national priorities. For some in our congregation this transition is welcome and for others it is feared.

For all of us, as with any change in political leadership, this transition will call on us to remember our baptismal covenant and use our citizenship to seek and serve Christ in all persons, strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. In doing so, we may be called to face consequences for standing with vulnerable populations who may suffer greatly if the safety net is unraveled. Yet, if there is a lesson to be drawn from Scripture today, I think it is that we are free in Christ to resist policies that would exploit and entrap the most vulnerable among us; to befriend the suffering and outcast as Jesus did; and to imagine ways of building bridges of reconciliation and righteousness.

As we face these challenges we need to do so with humility, not as those who have all the answers. God knows we have much to learn from one another, but especially from those who live on the margins. God knows we may need to learn how our actions or failure to act contribute to the problems of our world. Yet, we start from the perspective that’s God’s reconciling love which calls us beyond our comfort zones offers us the promise of a future filled with hope, a future in which we are called out of death into life.

Allow me to invite you to claim the unconditional love in which you are held by God and which was affirmed at your baptism. You are God’s child, deserving of love and respect, and God will use you to change the world. Repeat after me, if you will:

I am God’s child …
Deserving of love and respect, …
And God will use me to change the world.

Feel free as you come to communion to come to the font, dip your finger in the water, make the sign of the cross on your forehead, and remember your baptism. It is the highest honor the church will ever bestow upon you.