

Ascribe

Psalm 29
Matthew 3:13-17

I love how flexible and wonderfully illogical the English language can be. Though I occasionally express frustration with its rapid evolution—I am, in my heart, a traditionalist—over the years all of us have benefited from neologisms (new words or old words used in new ways), and the adoption of words from other languages. But we word nerds do have a dark side. We can be insufferable in our insistence on proper word use and grammar. For example, if only more people could learn where to place the word “only” in a sentence. The late, great columnist James Kilpatrick observed the difference between, “Only John hit Peter in the nose,” which means nobody else hit Peter; and, “John only hit Peter in the nose,” which means he did not also tweak his nose; and, “John hit Peter only in the nose,” which means he hit him nowhere else. Local car dealerships and restaurants advertising on the radio should learn these differences in order to communicate only what they intend.

We word nerds also like to note the difference a prefix can make. We can *describe* a thing. Or we can *inscribe* a thing. Or we can *prescribe* a thing. Or we can *proscribe* a thing. Or we can *ascribe* a thing, which means we can give credit where credit is due. So we find ascribe used in Psalm 29. “Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his holy

name;” this ancient poem begins. Scholars agree that while King David wrote it some 3,000 years ago, it existed in a much earlier form in the Canaanite culture the Hebrews overran when they entered the Promised Land. In other words, David translated it with a few alterations. This one goes back far in time.

Praise the Lord, these verses say, because of the Lord's power and glory. They allude to a thunderstorm coming in off the Mediterranean Sea. The “voice of the Lord”, thunder, crosses the “many waters”, the sea. That voice is powerful and full of majesty. No doubt some of you have camped out in a thunderstorm. You can hear it coming for a long time. As the lightning comes into view you begin to count the time between seeing the flashes and hearing the thunder. Six seconds to a mile makes the difference between the speed of light and the speed of sound. So when twenty-four seconds elapse the storm front is about four miles away. Eighteen seconds for three miles. The thunder grows louder. Maybe you can smell the rain as the time narrows to twelve, and then six seconds between lightning and thunder. Now it gets harder to distinguish which flash belongs to which rolling boom. And then it hits.

I have prayed, hard, while camping in a tent during a thunderstorm. One time it rained so hard for so long we literally started floating on our air mattresses. Once the most violent part of the storm passed—and with it, the fear—we just started laughing. What else can you do when you get caught up in a power so vastly beyond your control? The next day we told each other stories about our experiences of the storm. It felt like we had survived a battle of some kind. The sheer force of it reminded us

how small and temporary we really are. This happened around twenty years ago. We still talk about it in my extended family, most of whom were there.

The Psalmist tells us the voice of the Lord “breaks the cedars”. Cedars are the largest trees in the Middle East, growing mostly at higher elevations but also along river bottoms. King David cannot imagine a more impressive tree. Yet the voice of the Lord can break a cedar. Perhaps he had seen an actual incident of storm-brewed wind breaking a cedar. Perhaps he only imagined it. Either way, he ascribes limitless power to God. The Lord can “shake the wilderness”. The wilderness also played a particular role in the Hebrew understanding of the world. To their minds no more forbidding place could possibly exist. They had a collective memory going back many generations of their ancestors having wandered through the fearsome wilderness for decades. But the voice of the Lord can “shake the wilderness.” Ascribe to God great power, for God sits enthroned over fire, flood and even the wilderness.

If A equals B, and B equals C, should not A equal C? If God has limitless power, and Jesus is God, should not Jesus have that same limitless power? Why, then, does he submit to baptism at the hands of his wild man cousin John? John saw the problem. Mark and Luke tell us he was baptizing people in the River Jordan as a sign of their repentance from their sins. But Jesus has not sinned. John tries to talk him out of it. Jesus should baptize *him*, a sinner. But Jesus replies that he should get baptized to “fulfill all righteousness”. This does not mean the act of baptism will cleanse him of sins, thus making him righteous. It refers, rather, to the righteousness

of which Jesus will soon speak in his Sermon on the Mount, the righteousness of radical, complete obedience to every least little speck of God's law.

Jesus will soon preach about plucking out your eyes if they lead you to commit adultery, which he will define as even thinking about being unfaithful to your spouse. He will soon speak of hanging a millstone around your neck and throwing yourself into the water if it will prevent you from leading others into sin. He intends his baptism to be a sign to the people that he means business, so much so that he willingly submits to a human being's practice of a sacrament meant to symbolize cleansing from sin. He is starting to act out a drama that will conclude with him hanging on the cross, another place he does not deserve to be. But by so doing, he will open the path to forgiveness for all who ascribe to him the honor due him. All who call upon his name. All who accept their need for his work on their behalf.

People like the twelve year-old girl we baptized in a lake the very last Sunday we worshiped with our previous congregation. Was she particularly sinful? No more—and probably no less—than any other twelve year-old. But after getting dipped all the way back into the cold water she came up with a beautiful smile. Her mother, standing next to us knee-deep in the lake, burst into tears.

People like the Rubey baby, Henry, whom we baptized here last year. Henry comes from the fourth generation of Rubey's to pass through this church. For his baptism he wore a beautiful white outfit. White symbolizes purity. Is Henry any more

pure than the average young child? No, but with his parents' decision to have him baptized we all took on the responsibility of helping him grow into the righteousness of Christ, to become more like Jesus.

People like the young man who got baptized by my senior colleague at the first church I served. This would have happened in 1986 or 7. He had gone through the confirmation class and wanted to join the church. His parents had preferred he make his own decision to get baptized, so he had not received the sacrament as a baby or child. There was a complicating factor. Earlier that year, during the candle circle on the last night of the youth mission trip, a time of great emotion and of honest sharing in the trust the exhausting and rewarding week usually created, the young man had come out to the group as gay. This in a time and place of limited acceptance of gays and lesbians. There were a number of church members, some of them elders serving on the session, who believed that being gay was, frankly, a sin. They felt a gay person needed to repent of being gay in order to get baptized and join the church.

It seems almost impossible to believe today, but this was the attitude many held *in the Presbyterian Church*. Our brothers and sisters in more conservative churches often had—and have—even more dismissive, destructive ideas about sexuality and sin. But this would prove to be a decisive moment in that church, and in the hearts and minds of many affiliated with it. Including me. When that young man told the youth group he was gay the room fell utterly silent. Then he started weeping. He said, “Oh my God, have I screwed it up for me forever?” Then a young woman in the group,

a kind of matriarch for her peers, stood up, walked across the circle, sat down next to him and hugged him. I don't recall that she said anything. She did not need to. She had rewarded one of the bravest acts I have ever personally witnessed with complete acceptance. Her hug told the rest of us, adults included, that the young man belonged. He was fine as he was. She was going to make sure of that.

By the time they performed the baptism a lot of people in that church knew all or part of that story. It was a very large church; I would never try to pretend that every person in it agreed with the senior pastor's decision to perform the baptism. But he did, and we did, and the young man made his promises, among them that he would be Christ's disciple, to obey his word and to show his love. And we all promised we would strengthen his family ties with the household of God through our fellowship with him. Honestly, that sacrament felt like one of the most righteous things I have ever participated in personally.

Ascribe to the Lord your awe at the Lord's great power. Ascribe to the Lord your desire to obey the word of the Lord. Ascribe to the Lord your thanksgiving for moments like those baptisms: Christ's and the young man. Moments when we experience not just the glory of the Lord, but also his love and his righteousness. Give credit where credit is due. Ascribe to the Lord all power and glory.