

January 8, 2017

(Matthew 3: 13 - 17)

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the First Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The word “epiphany” comes from the Greek meaning “manifestation”, and that manifestation of Jesus occurs within several Gospel-told events...the most well known being the wonderful story of the Magi, or the ones we call “the Wise Men”. But the gospel reading appointed for today...the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist...is yet another...and that is our focus for this morning. Use your imagination with me today.

Into the muddy waters of the Jordan they have come. Levi, the tax collector...and all the other Jews would agree that Levi is the worst of all of them. Then, there is Miriam, the harlot. Simeon, a camel trader who cheats his customers. And Benjamin, who sells kosher meat in the center market, with his thumb on the scales. Not an innocent one in the entire group.

But they know who and what they are...and sometimes, they are the ones who, more than anyone else, want to be someone else. Someone looking for change...and they mean it.

And then, there is the other group that comes forward to be baptized. The Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders, the so-called righteous folk who think they need no repentance. They have come for baptism, too, but John wonders aloud if they are sincere about the whole thing...maybe they care about what others think, that it is just the popular thing to do. But they are not like Levi and Miriam and the others. Their act of repentance is not genuine, and John sees right through their pious charade...and he will have none of it. Calling them a “brood of vipers”, and dressing them down.

Some years ago, I saw a parallel in a quote cited in a copy of the Messenger, the on-line newsletter from the diocese, attributed to Stephen Colbert...and I quote as follows:

If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor, either we've got to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that he commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit that we just don't want to do it. (unquote)

What nerve! Calling out the church and Christians in that way, but is not it true? Has not Stephen Colbert identified today's so-called self-righteous “brood of vipers” who not only do not look for change, but also do not want it? That we might as well admit that we just do not want to love the poor and serve the needy without condition? That is tough stuff.

But, then...into these distinctions...by John the Baptist, and by Colbert today...of separating the self-deluded righteous from the acknowledged sinners...steps Jesus into the muddy water of the Jordan.

When Levi and Miriam and the other acknowledged sinful folks see the so-called righteous get blasted by John, they probably wonder about themselves, saying in effect, “I know that my life is a mess, and here are these other guys way more religious than me...and if John says that even these guys are not worthy of baptism, what does that say about me? What chance do I have?”

And right into this controversy...loud preaching, mudslinging, name calling...Jesus shows up for baptism. Everything stops and all eyes follow him as he enters the water. Slowly he moves through the water to John’s side, and in a quiet confident voice, he whispers in John’s ear. And suddenly, the loud preacher who has just been pounding the religious leaders for their hypocrisy, is reduced to mumbling.

What do you think is going through John’s mind as he baptizes the very Son of God? Here comes the One who is righteous, the last person on earth in need of baptism, and demands that he, John, do this “to fulfill all righteousness.” It makes no sense to John.

When Jesus rises from the muddy waters...in that instant, all those standing around...Levi, Miriam, all the known sinners..know instinctively that being worthy of such a thing is not the point. Being willing is what matters. Worthiness is not the issue. Grace is the issue. Obedience to God is the issue.

If Jesus had done it our way, he would never have gotten in that water. He might have declared himself a friend to sinners, but he would never have wanted to be mistaken for one of them. He could have stood on the banks of the Jordan and given a blessing to all those who emerged dripping wet. He might have even given John the Baptist a hand in administering some of the baptisms. He could have acted like one of them without being one of them.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, “We spend a lot of time talking about God’s love for sinners, but we sure do go to a lot of trouble not to be mistaken for one of them.”

That was not good enough for Jesus. It was not enough for Jesus....it could not be, if you and I think about his baptism in the concept of his manifestation...of his showing, or Epiphany to others. He wanted to fully...fully.... identify with sinners....“to fulfill all righteousness”....and he was willing to be taken for one if need be. Maybe Stephen Colbert has a better understanding after all.

That is why baptism is not a personal, or private thing, but has to be done in public...with the rest of us sinners gathered round...whether we admit it or not. We are all sinners redeemed by grace and to come together in worship and baptism is to acknowledge our fault...every last one of us....and ask, all over again, for the forgiveness that fulfills all righteousness.

When we talk about why and how this ritual came to be, we do it because Jesus did it, and because Jesus told us to do it. We do it as a witness of our faith.

But WHY Jesus was baptized, and WHY Jesus wants us to be baptized, seems to come clearer to us and to the church with the rediscovery of the vital connection between baptism and mission...as revealed to us within the greater plan by God.

In the renewed understanding of the church, we have come to realize a basic reality of ministry...that once again that there is nothing passive or static about being a Christian. Every one of us...man or woman, child or adult, rich or poor, healthy or infirm, sophisticated or simple....every one of us has an active role to play in the mission of the church. Each has a unique part in that purpose of God, which is nothing less than to restore all people to unity with God and one another in Christ. In serving so great a purpose, no person's role is small or insignificant. What each of us can do is essential and unique.

The words of our liturgy may pass from week to week with little fanfare or attention, but we are reminded of that vital connection between baptism and mission in the final words of the service. "Let us go forth in the name of Christ." "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord." "Let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit." Whichever form is used, the message is the same. The assembly of baptized people, the Christian congregation, is called upon to leave the place of worship and enter the field of mission, in the name of Christ, to go forth to love and serve the Lord by loving and serving the people around us. We are called to go forth in peace, rejoicing that the Spirit's power works through us to redeem and renew the world.

And in the several times each year when our worship includes the renewal of baptismal vows, we recommit ourselves to the Christian life....a life not only of faith, worship, and fellowship, but also repentance, proclamation, service, and peacemaking. We commit ourselves yet again to the mission that is ours in the home, the classroom, the office, the factory....wherever we find ourselves between one Sunday and the next....and we should do that with confidence because we know that in the most important sense Christ has already won the victory.

We find it all starts in today's story of the baptism of Jesus. Not in this beautiful marble font. Not a Baptist immersion tank. Not even the relatively clean waters of nearby Oneida Lake or Lake Delta. Just in the old muddy waters of the River Jordan, shared with livestock and all that would entail...and it was good enough for God. Good enough that a voice from heaven proclaims his Epiphany to all who were there to hear and could hear....no different than now.

We who have been baptized have also already gone down into the muddy, polluted waters, only to rise from whatever death we experience, ready for mission, calling each of us to rise up and go forth in the Name of God...Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.