

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Jan 12th 2014

“Then the memorable moment in the pump house when it dawned on her that the word ‘water’ spelled in one hand meant the water running over the other. It was nothing less than the beginning of her life as a person.”

– Walker Percy, writing about Helen Keller

Today’s feast, the baptism of Jesus, is one of those strange liminal times in the Church calendar year because it is two things at once: today is both the last Sunday of our Christmas season and the first Sunday in Ordinary time.

As we pray with these readings about Jesus’ baptism today we might find ourselves similarly split, our divided hearts not yet ready to slide away from the gifts (both material and otherwise) we’ve been given over these twelve days of Christmas and into the streets of ordinary life.

If so, that’s okay, and only for one reason: because ours is a God of humility and gentleness, one who does not break the bruised reed or quench the smoldering wick. Ours is a God who calls us relentlessly, tirelessly, but not by shouting, by grasping us by the hand and leading us out of confinement.

The Gospel reading we have today from Matthew begins with what seems to be a bit of theological throat-clearing, but actually leads us into the heart of God’s mysterious, kenotic love for us. We read in Matthew that John protests that he should not be one to baptize Jesus, “I am not worthy to untie the thongs of his sandals,” he says, “you should be baptizing me.” And it is true. Even more, we might rightly wonder why the sinless Jesus even needs to receive John’s baptism, a baptism of repentance. “What does Jesus have to repent for?” we rightly ask. Matthew’s answer (and our Church’s as well) is that Jesus has nothing to repent for, nothing to wash away. So why be baptized at all then? And why by John?

In order to answer this question the great theologians of the Church remind us of what we call the whole of the paschal mystery, that is, they remind us that Jesus’ Incarnation, life, death and resurrection are of one piece, one whole movement of the divine mystery into the fragility and finitude of humanity so that we might be joined fully to God’s divinity. These theologians point out that Jesus’ baptism is a particular part of this whole, a kind of double submission, another example of the creator

of the universe emptying Godself to take the form of a servant, that is, our human form. The first of the two submissions is Jesus' submission to John, the one who was sent to prepare his way. And the second submission is his acceptance of not just our human flesh (as in the Incarnation), but of our very neediness, our existential thirst for repentance and forgiveness and acceptance. In this way, these theologians read the baptism as another sign of God being Emmanuel, with us fully and completely – this time fully with us even in our need for conversion. As a part of the whole paschal mystery then, the baptism that we hear in the Gospel today is another way that the creator of the universe says to us: “To be with you I give everything. I give all to you, all my divinity, everything. Nothing will keep you from me.”

The question we are faced with today, then, as we stand in the doorway between the season of the Incarnation and the Ordinary season of Jesus' active ministry, is the same question we are always faced with: will we accept the self-Gift of such a humble God?

When I am honest, my own answer is both yes and no. The excitement, the yes, comes because accepting God really means accepting that the words spoken to Jesus today are spoken to us: we are God's beloved children, with whom He is well pleased. This is who we are at root, beloved children.

The reluctance, the no, might come from anyplace beyond that doorway. We might hesitate in the doorway of acceptance because we know who we've been in the past, we know those gifts and flaws. But the future? We don't know that version of ourselves yet. Or we might hesitate because we don't know whether the gifts we've been given during the holidays/holy days will carry over into the rest of our lives. Or we might hesitate because we're not sure we can trust the voice that calls us beloved, not yet. Or we might trust that voice, but still be afraid because we know where such love leads, to the cross.

Whatever it is that handcuffs our hearts, it's okay. Not okay to stay constrained, but okay to bring our hesitation to a God who gives up all, over and over again, to be who God is: Emmanuel, fully with us, even with us in our existential thirst, our neediness. God asks us – and never tires of asking – to accept His self gift: “Accept me, accept me, accept me.” But he does not force us. Our is not a God who will force us to be beloved.

And this for one reason: because God knows what it is to be fragile and finite. Because ours is the kind of God willing to be baptized into our very neediness. It's because of this that we can trust Him not to break us, bruised reeds that we are.

It's because He is with us this fully that we can trust Him not to push us out the door of Christmas season too quickly, but instead to give us today to stand on the threshold and look out into the world of ordinary time. It's because we are the sons and daughters of this kind of God that, this Sunday, it's okay for us to be both ready and not ready, divided, both in and out; to stand in the doorway that leads to the rest of our lives and feel both the fear and the excitement of walking in the ordinary world with a such a God.

Give to the LORD, you sons of God,
give to the LORD glory and praise,
Give to the LORD the glory due his name;
adore the LORD in holy attire.

– Psalm 29

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