

Epiphany 1, Yr. A
Baptism of the Lord
January 12, 2020

Isaiah 42:1-9, Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 3:13-17

This morning, as we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, I'd like to talk about our own baptisms: what it's about, what it asks of us, what it commits us to. And I'd like to suggest that it's about nothing less than our on-going transformation. Our call to continual change, growing every more Christ-like as we live into that call that began at our baptism.

You'll remember the comparison that I told you about after that one clergy retreat, where the preacher likened our spiritual journey, at least for most of us, as a gradual growth. He compared it to the journey that the cucumber needs to take in order to become a pickle. So, the question of change and transformation. A friend once said to me that he didn't think people could change. (He later said that he meant that change was slow and hard.) Think of all those developmental psychologists who talk about the stages of life. The theories, in general, point to the fact that it's possible for us to grow from the infant condition of total self-absorption, that condition where IT'S ALL ABOUT ME to that place of full maturity, that place where we can love others, and give back, that place that's sometimes called generativity. As infants, it really does all have to be about me and my needs, but if we're still there when we are in our 40s, or 60s, or 70s, that's tragic. It's also one definition of sin – sin as everything curved back on to oneself.

Some commentators lament that the church doesn't talk enough about change and growth in our spiritual lives. One person I read talked about a young man who had come faithfully to church through confirmation and then completely disappeared. When the family was asked about his absence, the reply was, "Oh, I thought he was done." There's an old joke about mice in a church. The members had tried everything to get rid of them without success. Finally someone said: "I know what. Let's confirm them and we'll never see them again." Fortunately, that's not what's happening here!

If you think about this morning's scriptures, Jesus' baptism was the beginning, not the end, of his ministry. And, likewise, it's the beginning of ours. Bishop Will Willamon puts it this way: "...Baptism is each Christian's ordination into the priesthood of Christ, each Christian's commissioning to share in Christ's work in the world...At your baptism you are set apart that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

The liturgy of baptism that we use in the church today is a bit minimalist when it comes to representing what's actually happening. In the recent baptisms that we've celebrated, I've talked about those ancient liturgies where the baptistery was dug into the floor and where the candidate went down three steps, the priest would immerse the person three times, and then the newly baptized person would walk up again, out of the water, to be reclothed in white garments. All of that was to visually make the point that baptism is a dying to the old self and a rebirth to the life of Christ. That business about dying to the old self. Paul talks about this in Romans:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him...so that, just as Christ was raised...we too might walk in newness of life.

Sounds good, right? But how do we do it? How do we open ourselves to that kind of growth and make that kind of change?

If we look first at Jesus, Matthew tells us that he comes up out of the water and hears God say, "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." How's that for affirmation? And how's that for the naming of a vocation? Jesus would have heard that through the Hebrew Scriptures, including the one we heard from Isaiah. To be the beloved son was to be the chosen one, the one upon whom God placed his spirit. And that scripture we heard this morning would have named what that meant, for Jesus and for each of us: God has us by the hand, he intends us to be a light to the nations, to open the eyes of blind, to free prisoners from darkness. Remember me telling you about the little boy in Dallas? The

rector thought he could answer the questions around baptism by himself, rather than through his parents and godparents, so when I asked, “Do you wish to be baptized,” he said NO, NO, NO. I’m sure that had to do with a crowded church and the unfamiliarity of coming up to the front, but still, when you think of the enormity of what we’re doing, perhaps we’re all tempted to say, if not NO then, “Well, let me think about it!”

The Acts reading is also about change. We don’t have the whole reading, but it has to do with Peter and Cornelius both having visions. Peter, you’ll remember, was on a rooftop and saw a sheet with all kinds of animals, some clean and some unclean, being lowered and he heard God telling him to eat. When Peter, following the Jewish tradition of refusing to eat unclean foods, said he’d rather not, God said that what God had made clean, Peter had no right to call profane. About the same time some men came from Cornelius who had also had a vision telling him to send for Peter. When Peter arrived at Cornelius’ house, he figured out what was being asked of him. That’s where we came in with today’s reading and Peter saying that he now understood that God shows no partiality. It would be easy to read that quickly and miss the incredible change required of Peter. Peter was a Jew; all his identity was wrapped up in that. And to the Jews at that time, Gentiles were the “other.” A good Jew wouldn’t visit a Gentile and certainly wouldn’t eat with one. This was a huge change for Peter – truly God was doing a new thing.

So, what about us? Can we change? What are the obstacles to change? What keeps us from growing ever more into that baptismal covenant? To start with I think we all have our own cultures, our own traditions, our own ways of doing things, our firmly held opinions. And it takes a lot of energy to rethink those things. It’s easier just to keep going along as we always have. Sometimes we change because we come up against a dead end; the way we’re living our lives simply isn’t working. That could be any number of things: a divorce, an illness, some other kind of failure that causes us to rethink what we’re doing and our assumptions. I recently saw a NY cartoon and showed husband and wife sitting in their cave surrounded by really big rocks, with one saying to the other: I REALLY THOUGHT WE’D BE HAPPIER WITH BIGGER ROCKS. Sometimes it’s

more like the pickle approach. I remember when I was in seminary that I was going to three different churches and it occurred to me that it might be really instructive to put together a questionnaire asked people to say why they were going to church. One of my fellow students said he thought that was incredibly arrogant, which really took me aback. When I asked him what he meant, he explained that he had been in the army in Viet Nam and when he returned to Texas he had joined the Methodist church there since it was the 'mover and shaker' church and he thought it would be the best place for business contacts. "But then," he said, "one day I heard something..." And that something changed his life.

Change: maybe it's suddenly realizing that you really are totally loved by God; that you don't have to do anything to earn that love. That you don't have to be afraid any more. Or maybe you come to the insight that God really doesn't show partiality, that everyone is loved and that your call is to love in the same way.

A wonderful story about open hearts is told by Mark Labberton, the president of Fuller Seminary. He said that shortly after 9/11 some Muslim scholars came to the school. They needed a place to pray several times a day, so he gave them his office. There was some concern that this would alienate donors. At one point, Dr. Labberton asked a person who had been imprisoned by some fanatical Muslims how he felt about Muslims using his office to pray. "Giving them the use of an office?" The man replied. "What's the big deal about that? We supposed to be giving them our lives."

Most of us won't ever be in that kind of situation, nor will we be called upon to do some incredibly difficult thing. But we are ALL called to do whatever we can, wherever we are. We should start perhaps by thinking of Jesus' life, the life we're supposed to be imitating, and seeing where we are falling short. Where we could be more loving, more generous, where we can, as Peter described, go about doing good.

Living into our baptism is a lifelong task and, if we're doing it right, it will make big demands on us. But perhaps the best thing to remember is that we aren't doing it alone. We're doing it with this community, with other

people of goodness of whatever faith and, most importantly, we can trust, as Isaiah says, that God has us by the hand, each of us, his beloved son or daughter.

Amen.