

Sermon ✝ January 9, 2022
Psalm 29 / Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
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Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story about her Grandmother Lucy. Lucy was a very strange looking woman. She had lost both her legs to diabetes and had wooden stumps where limbs should be. Her weak eyes demanded that she wear dark glasses. Most of the time, she looked like a disabled bomber pilot.

But to her granddaughters, she was wonderful. Whenever Barbara would visit her grandmother, grace would abound. In the closet would be wrapped packages enough for a surprise each day of the visit. The meals were delicious always with a favorite dessert. Then there were the shopping trips to buy dresses and crinolines and new hair bows. But, the best part of these visits were the baths. Each night Grandma Lucy would draw a hot bath filled with suds, and with her big sponge she would polish Barbara's skin. Then, following the bath she would anoint her granddaughter's body with Jergen's lotion all the way down to the soles of her feet. The perfect ending would be the *Evening in Paris* dusting powder when Lucy would tickle Barbara's body with a pale blue powder puff. Barbara writes: "*When Grandma Lucy was done, I knew that I was precious. I was absolutely convinced that I was loved and nothing has happened since to shake that conviction* "

My own story is not nearly as exotic, but to me it felt the same. As a small child I suffered from ear aches. Many a night . . . I would lie there in my bed for hours screaming because the pain was so intense.

But always with me was my mother—holding me, staying with me. I felt loved—in my smallness, in my sickness, in my weakness, in my imperfectness. I felt loved not because I was safe. I felt safe because I was loved—"precious" as Barbara Brown puts it—and nothing has happened since to shake my conviction. It was such an early experience of trust that helped me figure out the meaning of faith, which is after all, nothing more and nothing less than trust, trusting God, no matter what.

This morning our scripture passages give us two different pictures of God. One is a picture of might. The other is a picture of mercy. One presents a God of glory. The other presents a God of grace. One in bold palette presents a vivid Lord of Fire. The other, in softer tones, gives us a lavish Lord of Love. Both of these pictures are true.

In Psalm 29 we meet the Voice—the powerful Voice, the majestic Voice, the Voice that thunders, that breaks the cedars, that flashes forth making oaks to whirl, stripping the forest bare. This God is not a God to mess with, not a God to mutter about, not a God to meddle with.

In our gospel lesson, when we meet John the Baptist, we see that he clearly worships this kind of mammoth, mighty, master God. He worries that the Messiah to come will sweep into the wilderness consuming human sin as if it were twigs in a tinder box burning it with an unquenchable fire.

But much to John's surprise, and perhaps disappointment, the God he expects is not the God who arrives. The Mighty Messiah turns out to be the Gentle Jesus.

Rather than a military man lording it over his subjects—we meet, instead, a modest man, who wades into muddy water, choosing to be a companion with those he has come to serve.

The two conflicting images of the Holy Spirit included in Luke's passage underline the difference between John's expectation and the reality of Jesus.

For John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit is like a ferocious fire, representing the judgment of God. But, when the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus, it is like a dove, like the Noah's Ark dove that marked the end of God's judgment. The Fire God is replaced by the Dove God, the Love God.

Of course, in all of the Gospel accounts describing the baptism of Jesus, one question remains unanswered. Why was Jesus baptized? Why did he need to be baptized? After all, according to John, baptism is for the purpose of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. What did Jesus need to repent of? And for what did he need to be forgiven?

Actually, when you think about it, this one who is to do the baptizing never baptizes a soul. Instead, Jesus submits to baptism himself, kneeling in the mud and the muck and the mire. For the same reason he is born in a manger, that he eats with prostitutes and tax collectors, that he cries and prays and sleeps in a garden, that he dies a painful, very human death.

Quite simply Jesus comes to be like us, so we can grow to be like him. Jesus is baptized into our humanity, so that we can be baptized into his divinity.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, those who are baptized in the same font become siblings—they are considered the same flesh and blood—they are kin with one another. In this sense, Jesus became siblings with the crowd, all those with whom he was baptized in the River Jordan.

The personal name we receive is important. But much more important is the spiritual name we receive—Christian—bearer of Christ—sister and brother of Christ.

There is the story that a Lutheran pastor tells about one of those embarrassing moments in ministry.

He was in the middle of performing a wedding ceremony, just about to lead the couple through their vows, when, all of a sudden, he forgot the name of the groom.

Trying to cover the awkward moment, the pastor asked the groom with great solemnity "With what name were you baptized? "

The groom, a bit taken aback, paused. But then with great confidence, he responded, "I was baptized with the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!"

This didn't help the pastor much, but at least this guy understood the meaning of baptism!

The Greek word for baptism means: To dip, to immerse, to submerge—and my favorite—to saturate. Baptism is, for all of us the bath of the Beloved, when God takes pleasure in saturating us—saturating us with water, saturating us with grace, saturating us with blessing. It is also important to remember that we are not baptized Episcopalian or Presbyterian or Catholic or Methodist or Lutheran or whatever . . . we are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We are baptized—Christians.

Often times, when I have a meeting with church folks who I am getting to know for the first time and we are going around the room introducing ourselves, I also ask them when and where they were baptized. The answers vary. Most know that they were baptized . . . but for many the details escape them. And seldom do they know the actual date.

You know, as Christians, our baptism date should be as important as our birth date. I was baptized on June 12, 1949 at First Congregational Church in Kenosha. And I yearly remember the day. Not with a cake or balloons or a party. Rather, I privately and quietly give thanks for my parents and sponsors who brought me to church and stood by the font as I was saturated with baptismal water . . . as I became a sibling with all those before me and all those yet to be baptized.

And despite the fact that we remain partial, sinful, fragile, imperfect people, our original blessing can empower us if we remember that we are baptized.

Through this saturation of blessing and of belonging, we become the beloved—those set apart by God's love to become love in the world. *"You are my child, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased."*

Remember your baptism, my friends. Remember that you are blessed. Remember that you belong. Remember that you are the beloved. And remember that it is a gracious God that has taken delight and pleasure in who you are and who you are becoming.

How can we do anything else but be a blessing to others?