

I am convinced that one of the gifts of our baptisms is that we don't understand them as well as we think we do. Often we tend to treat them as a stamp, some sort of membership card for a private club; if you're like me, they are an event that takes a lifetime to sort out, as shot-through with mystery as anything about our relationship with God. In his autobiography, Thomas Merton describes the days after his own baptism as an adult, his struggle to comprehend what had happened to him as passing through a desert; it was a place where he "would have a chance to give God great glory by simply trusting and obeying him, walking in the way ...that would lead me to a land I could not imagine or understand". His own inner struggle is a lens onto the scene we have in this morning's gospel, with our own seat at a baptism. Jesus appears out of the desert among the rest of those in the river about to be baptized by John, and there is an argument about who should be baptizing whom: this is, after all, the one for whom he has been preparing the way, but John is one for making sure he observes the dictates of hierarchy. Jesus is among us, preparing for his earthly ministry, and when he tells John that his own baptism is to be observed to fulfill all righteousness, it is the obedience to the dictates of a God who joins us in the fragility of being human. Beneath this event is a tension we have to live with; one who is willing to join the rest of humanity in acknowledgement of our frailty and brokenness and, in fulfilling that role, is declared the Son, the Beloved.

Matthew is writing for an audience that is suspicious of the reasons for this baptism—why should one who is without sin undergo the same act as the rest of humanity, but it turns out that John need as much repentance as the rest of us, a change of mind about the meaning of righteousness. To be righteous, in Matthew's terms, is to act in accordance with the will of God and he eventually relents. But it is easy to be suspicious of the blessings that mold us, whether it is by those who have shaped us in more ways than we can name or the blessings that come in the unexpected, grace-filled moments of our lives. There is something within us that says these things must be earned somehow, that we have to merit the things given us, even when it is clear to us that they are more meaningful to us because they are given to us freely in every way.

So when we walk down to the Jordan this morning, amid the crush of people who are being baptized, we see one who wades in and at the moment the water is being poured over him, the spirit descends and we hear the sound from heaven, "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well-pleased." The voice marks the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, and the temptation is to see him as isolated, somehow apart from the rest of the crowd that day, and the belovedness declared from heaven about how singular he is. But he is literally immersed in our condition, an inextricable part of all we are going through, and that is part of the righteousness he asks John to recognize. He is one among the crowd, and the voice from heaven does not change how immersed he is in the hopes, trials and fears of everyone around him.

It also says something about our own baptisms and what they mean about our belovedness. We are beginning the season after Epiphany and the Baptism of our Lord, which we are celebrating today, is as much about how cherished we are by God, for no reason that we can earn, as it is about the booming voice of the divine over the waters as it is about a well-pleased Father. We make many commitments at baptisms, for those about to be baptized and for ourselves, commitments to spread the Good News by word and example, to respect the dignity of every human being. But our baptisms also point toward something else: how deeply embedded in God's love for the world we are, irrespective of who or what we have been, and whether we want to acknowledge it.

Both of my own children were baptized on this date in the church's calendar, several years apart. My son's was in 1996; it was the year of an early-January blizzard that stretched down the east coast.

We were living north of the city at the time but attending a church in Atlanta. My sister and her husband had arrived the day before as sponsors and were staying in another part of the city. When I awoke that morning and saw the conditions outside, I immediately phoned the priest, who told me that he lived about twenty miles away but planned to be there. So we all piled in the car and with our coats, hats and mittens and crawled down the interstate, my every other thought being, "I don't understand it; of all the days of the year..." When we reached the church, with about ten minutes to spare, there was general rejoicing, both ours and the rest of the congregation—apparently some were taking odds on whether we would make it or not. The rest of the day was a blur, but rarely have I felt the experience of being so known and loved as a child of God.

To risk such a trip, even at ten-miles an hour on a sparsely-traveled freeway on a Sunday morning, was not something I would ordinarily contemplate. With the benefit of twenty-plus years, I wonder if I would try it again. Yet my heart told me it was the right thing, especially when I heard the folks around me promising to support my son's new life in Christ with a resounding, "We will!" I did not understand, but I knew in that moment the love of God for my son and our family in a way that was unmistakable.

What Jesus allows in that moment by the Jordan, I believe, is a relinquishing of control, a willingness to put the beginning of his earthly ministry in the hands of one who does not understand but knows the one who is speaking to him. He allows trust to grow, the trust that is the coin of the realm in the kingdom that is being revealed to the world, trust in something that we cannot understand but can know, whether we meet him in the stranger or in the living presence at the altar.

That mystery is at the heart of what Jesus and the rest of us experience; it is a promise of the love of God, the belovedness of daughters and sons. But when we experience that love, this new righteousness at the center of our relationship with the living God, it is under circumstances that we cannot control any more than an automobile sliding down an icy freeway. Whether we are in the midst of the sickness of a parent, the joy and trial of raising children, whenever we step across a threshold into a new part of our lives it is through a God whose love for us does not change, even though we might feel about to be swept down the Jordan at the time. Our baptism with this God-with-skin-on happens over a lifetime and the one assurance we have is that he will be waist-deep in it with us.