

January 10, 2010
Luke 3:1-23
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Wade in the Water

Baptisms are joyous occasions. However, embedded in the ritual is something about sin and our universal struggle with sin. In today's gospel reading we hear John the Baptist proclaiming a baptism for the repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And Jesus chose to be baptized. What is going on here for John and for Jesus? Why did they each wade in the water?

Sometimes we avoid conversation about sin. Ironically, partly this is a reflection of our sinfulness itself. With shock and feigned innocence we say, "Who me, a sinner?" We don't want to face our own direct misdeeds, our own shadow, our own complicity in the world's injustices. We might be wise to stop and remember that self-righteousness is itself sinful.

On the other hand, we are aware that at times our tradition has beaten us to a bloody pulp in focusing on sin. The church has abused its own power by over focusing on sin to manipulate the people to do what it wanted, to keep its control over the people. In other words the church has been sinful in the ways it has heaped guilt and shame on individuals, while overlooking its own complicity in systemic sin and violence.

Sin is part of the human experience – in both its individual manifestations as well as its systemic patterns of alienation and injustice. We know separation from, and brokenness with, our own souls, one another and God. John the Baptist knew this and he didn't run away from it. Jesus knew it and he walked into it. We would be wise to know it too.

Kathleen Norris, a contemporary writer about spiritual matters, in reflecting on some people's desire to remove the word 'wretch' from the hymn *Amazing Grace*,
(*that saved a wretch like me.*)
commented, "If you can't ever admit to being a wretch, you haven't been paying attention."
(*Amazing Grace*, pg. 167)

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Although today's gospel reading concludes with the baptism of Jesus, it begins with the word of God coming to John the Baptist. This story functions to lead us into the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It hints at themes of Jesus' public ministry and to whom it will be addressed.

Luke 3 begins: *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee...*

This introduction to John's prophetic ministry blends patterns from Greco-Roman historical records and the Hebrew prophets standard description of call. If we put it in our contemporary context it would sound like this:

In the first year of the administration of President Barack Obama, when John Baldacci was governor of Maine, during the time that The Rev. David Gaewski was Conference Minister for the UCC in Maine, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. John went into all the region around the Androscoggin River, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

In the midst of powerful political and religious leaders, God's word came to one living on the fringe, the unknown prophet John, who is in the wilderness. No earthly credentials, no overt authority for what he is about to do. One never knows through whom God will choose to send a word. John's call is to prepare the way so that *all flesh* shall see the salvation of God. The gospel of Luke is always making the circle bigger, including the unknowns, the outsiders, the nobodies – all flesh are included.

John was a radical. He challenged political and religious leaders. He rebuked King Herod for his adulterous behavior with Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things Herod had done. For this John eventually lost his head.

That part of his radical message is obvious to us. But this time in sitting with John's story I began to see more clearly John's rebuke of the religious leaders and religious traditions through his ministry of baptism. For John offered baptism to everyone, to all flesh. In John and Jesus' time the crucial Jewish ritual for forgiveness was sacrifice. As biblical scholar Morton Smith describes it "By John's time the only place in the country where Jews could legally offer sacrifices was Jerusalem, and its services were expensive. To introduce into this situation a new, inexpensive, generally available, divinely authorized rite, effective for the remission of all sins, was John's great invention." (quote found in *The Historical Jesus*, John Dominic Crossan, pg. 231)

Before John only the well-to-do and the well-connected were able to participate in a ritual of forgiveness. The high priests in Jerusalem had a corner on the market for forgiveness. Everyone else was outside the circle of grace. Everyone else was doomed. That's a lot of everyone elses.

In fact, John's challenge to the religious authorities was even more striking in that he chose to baptize in the Jordan. They couldn't just ignore him, like they might have if he was hidden in backwaters somewhere. The Jordan is more than just a river to the Jews. From the wilderness their ancestors crossed over the Jordan to the promised land. John is now inviting everyone, who finds themselves in a spiritual wilderness to wade in the waters, to know the promise of forgiveness and the offer of new life through the ways of repentance.

John's baptism isn't a get away with anything free card. It is a cleansing, a ritual for changing ones ways. Repent, literally "return," meant to return to the way of life charted by the covenant between God and Israel. When the people ask John what that means his answers are primarily

about economic justice. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

It is a powerful reminder that repentance and forgiveness are not just about private personal matters. Repentance and forgiveness engage all the strands of our lives, private and public. Sin – alienation and brokenness- is a powerful systemic reality – in Jesus’ day and in our own - and calls for all the spiritual wisdom, grace, and strength we can embrace individually and collectively. But we cannot do it alone.

And that’s where Jesus walks onto the scene. Why would Jesus embrace a baptism for the repentance of the forgiveness of sins for himself? Our tradition has often been uneasy about Jesus’ baptism because the orthodox stance is that Jesus is without sin. The problem is that stance is focused on sin as simply individual actions and doesn’t give enough weight to the reality that sin is also a systemic reality that no human can escape. Jesus knew our common lot and lived in the midst of systemic sin just as we do.

A poem “Stepping in the Mud” by Joseph Donders (Imaging the Word, V. 3, pg. 118) describes Jesus’ baptism this way:

*The mud of human evil
is very deep,
it stinks forcefully,
it is full of dangerous gases,
and there was Jesus,
in front of John,
asking to be allowed
to bend down in that mud.
And John,
no wonder,
hesitated.*

*But he, Jesus,
he went down,
and when he came up,
the mud still streaming...
HEAVEN OPENED,
And a voice was heard...
(and) a new Spirit
a new life
and a new heart
were announced,
glory, glory, alleluia.
He was bathed in light...
drowned in God’s voice...
full of spirit;*

*but what about the mud,
was he going to forget it? ... (No)
because once he got the spirit,
that Spirit drove him...
to do his work in this world,
to struggle with evil in us,...
in this world,
in order to overcome it.*

Jesus didn't hesitate. He waded in the water. He knew the grip of the mud. He let himself be immersed and rise again. And God's response was, "You are mine." Christ does not leave us to struggle with the mud on our own, but walks with us and reminds us again and again, "You too are a child of God."

It is said that when Martin Luther was particularly struggling with the 'mud' of human existence he would say to himself or even cry out loud, "I am baptized. I am baptized."

"What then shall we do?" the people asked John the Baptist. Let us hold fast to the naming and claiming of our baptisms. As children of God, let us hold fast to the presence of Christ, who knows both the mud and the water.

And I suspect many of us would be wise to go home and check the number of coats in our closets, and if we have two or more share them with those who have none.