



CALVARY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

**The First Sunday after Epiphany:
The Baptism of our Lord
"Shelby Maxwell Power,"
Sunday, January 13, 2019
The Rev. Paul McLain**

'I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming.' In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

The Saturday night before I was to be baptized, fully immersed in the baptismal pool called the baptistery, as a 9-year old at Monticello Baptist Church, I offered a prayer for the most powerful person in our congregation. My prayer was not for our dynamic pastor, Kenneth Roberts. It was not for my devoted Sunday school teacher, Eutha Davis. It was not even for my mother, Marilyn, the church organist and a leader of countless ministries. Instead, I offered a prayer for Shelby Maxwell. You see, one of Shelby's jobs was to go to the church on Saturday night and turn on the heater for the baptistery. I earnestly prayed that night that Mr. Shelby remembered his job so that I did not get a cold awakening on Sunday morning.

Shelby Maxwell was a very simple man who took on both paid and volunteer jobs around town that no one else wanted. Every afternoon at 3:30, he was out in the middle of the highway no matter the weather, to direct traffic when the side-by-side clothing factory and junior high school closed for the day. As kids we joked about his floppy rain hat and all his whistle blowing and funny hand signals. I regret that now. Looking back, there was a beautiful and humble spirit in Shelby.

We find that same beautiful and humble spirit in John the Baptist in our Gospel passage today. People were hungry for a Messiah, a deliverer, to lift them out of Roman oppression. They wondered if John might be the one. He was quick to let them know that there was one more powerful than him yet to come. In fact, he said, "I am not worthy to untie the thongs of his sandals."

John the Baptist knew his role. He was not to be the Messiah, but to point to the Messiah. He was to prepare the people for the Messiah. And he was, first and foremost, to serve the Messiah. In the verses we skip in this passage in Luke, John's faithful service and prophetic preaching earned him a jail cell, and would ultimately cost him his life.

When Jesus the Messiah appeared, his first act in beginning his ministry was not a rousing sermon or a call to arms. Instead, he went out to where people were being baptized. And the Gospel says, "Jesus was also baptized." His baptism took place as part of a shared, communal baptism.

We'll experience that here in a few moments. Four children will be baptized. And all of us will renew *our* Baptismal Covenant. There is something humbling about doing things as a community. We share the stage with others. Even Jesus shared the waters of the Jordan River with the others being baptized that day. The act of baptism itself is humbling. It involves bowing and submitting ourselves in water. It involves making ourselves vulnerable.

In being baptized in community, Jesus showed what sort of power he would exercise. Robert Capon wrote of two kinds of power, right-handed power and left-handed power. Right-handed power is governed by the logical left hemisphere of the brain. It is the power of applying force to get results. While it has its place in getting us from point A to B, it has its limitations, especially when it becomes exaggerated as the power of ego.

Left-handed power is governed by the more intuitive, open, and imaginative right side of the brain. It can look to the world like weakness, intervention that seems to be nonintervention. It is the power of paradox. It is the power of humility. It is the power that changes hearts. That was the power that John the Baptist preached. That was the power that Jesus lived. That was the power I saw in Shelby Maxwell.

Shelby lived out his baptismal covenant in a variety of ways, both within the church and in the community. He not only turned on the baptistery heater and directed traffic. He also volunteered for the Monticello Fire Department. Shelby was once so determined to get into a house with a small fire in the kitchen in the back he grabbed the axe from the fire truck and valiantly chopped through the front door. He later learned the door was unlocked. That was Shelby. He may not have made the smartest decisions, but whenever he did something, he gave it 200 percent. His motives were always built around the question, "What can I do to help someone else?"

The first thing Jesus did after being baptized was to pray. He humbled himself before his Father. Some of the most precious memories of Shelby are his prayers. They were the most eloquent of prayers. They were always genuine, heartfelt, raw, repentant, thoughtful, and good.

After Jesus was baptized and he offered a prayer, the heavens opened. Those of us who had the privilege to see how Shelby lived his life and offered his prayers were blessed to see little openings in the clouds. We were blessed to see little glimpses of heaven.

And as I look back at my prayer that Saturday night before being baptized, I realize now that I *was* praying for the most powerful member of the church. Shelby Maxwell's power was about a lot more than lighting the baptistery heater. His power was to humble himself, to submit himself, and to give himself fully to Jesus and others.

Our dream for these (our) four children and for all of us is to be baptized into nothing less than the humble power of Jesus. *Amen.*