

A Seat in the Circle
Epiphany 1A: The Baptism of our Lord
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When our kids were little, Ardelle and I had a group of friends in Arkansas who liked to play music together. Every so often, we'd set up chairs in someone's living room, or maybe on the porch when the weather was nice, somebody would kick off a song, and everyone else would join in on whatever instrument they brought along, even if the instrument was their voice. Dennis played a old upright bass with a handful of a friend's ashes rustling inside. Deanna could play anything from Irish reels to Bach concertos on her violin, but Bonnie used the very same circle to teach herself the fiddle almost from scratch. There might be a mandolin or lap dulcimer and there were almost certainly way more guitars than any responsible bluegrass concertmaster would allow in her little orchestra.

Most importantly, there were no tryouts. All levels of musicianship and expertise were welcome, otherwise I'd never have learned enough to strum along. The only criterion for joining the circle was a desire to join the circle. Actually, that's not quite right. You had to take one more step. You had to make that desire incarnate. You had to take your seat and take part in the making of the music.

At some point that circle became an image of church for me. Not just because every now and then, in between the John Prine and Beatles tunes, someone would belt out "Standing In the Need of Prayer" or "I'll meet you in the morning by the bright riverside." To this day, when I hear "I'll Fly Away" I expect it roll straight into "They call it that good old mountain dew. And them that refuse it are few." Do you know it? "I'll hush up my mug if you fill up my jug with that good old mountain dew." It's a medley I haven't quite convinced Kristin and the choir to try.

But that music circle is an image of church for me because what's required first is simply that you take your seat and give it a go, adding your song and your voice to everybody else's. It's not about performance. It's about participation. And if that's an image of church, it's an image of baptism as well.

When Jesus stepped into that line of people to be baptized by John at the Jordan, in spite of John's shock and indignation that he would do such a thing, and in spite of the descending spirit and voice from heaven and all ... in spite of all that, and before it was anything of cosmic significance, Jesus's baptism was a simple matter of stepping into line with a bunch of ordinary sinners, wasn't it? People who'd come to confess and repent and hopefully find a little cleansing and forgiveness in the process.

But lots of us share John's question. Which is essentially, "What the heaven are you doing here, Jesus? You're not supposed to have any sins to wash away."

I think part of our confusion is that over the centuries we lost sight of what baptism is at its core. Over the centuries baptism became an increasingly individual affair. It was increasingly about the state of an individual's soul before God. But every time I return to the baptism of Jesus, it seems like he saw this tendency in us coming and tried to address it right at the outset. In Matthew, Mark, and in Luke, Jesus steps conspicuously in line to be baptized. And when all three synoptic gospels recount something, it suggests to me that the story that follows just isn't going to make much sense without it.

Now, there was a personal element in that baptism scene, just as surely as that music circle expanded one particular person at a time when someone new took a seat. And all of those individuals were there for the cleansing ritual John the Baptist had become known for, a ritual that had to do with getting free somehow from the sins that continue to break our world and our lives apart. But when Jesus responds to John's question with, "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness," I think the "us" really means "us." Which is to say, Jesus and John and Jennifer and Joshua and all the others at the river that day were in this fulfilling of righteousness work together.

Which I also think is to say that whatever sins each individual had to come to terms with in their life, whatever failures they needed to repent of and turn in a different direction from wasn't a matter of personal worthiness before God. It was about making the world a little more right. Because righteousness is akin to rightness, just as holiness is akin to wholeness. Each person in that line seeking healing and forgiveness and release from what was most broken in their lives was seeking that healing not only for their own sake, but for the person they were standing next to in line. Sin wasn't a matter of personal impurity. It's been a matter of broken relationships since those archetypal breakdowns in the garden. And we address our sins in this community called church so our lives will be in fuller harmony with the lives around us.

This, of course, is the work Jesus was up to, isn't it? John may have had the same wrong idea about Jesus's so called sinlessness that we do. It wasn't that he never had a naughty thought or that he didn't experience the full range of human emotions. And it's certainly not that he stayed insulated from the violence and pain of this world. The difference is that Jesus stepped into line next to us in embodied relationship with us. But in him, none of the violence and pain of the world got returned to the world as violence and pain, even from the cross.

And in his life, he showed us that we don't set the world more right by keeping our individual selves pure and separate from the world. The world is made a little more right, a little more righteous, as more of us find ourselves in line together, learning to give the world whatever goodness our lives might have to offer, even when what the world offers us is only pain.

Last Wednesday evening, Dana Sue Percer circled up a bunch of chairs in her living room, not to play music, but so our Sacred Ground group could meet. Sacred Ground is the Episcopal Church's anti-racism curriculum, and I am so grateful to have been offered a seat with the people that Anna Kathryn Word and Elizabeth Crosby have brought together. We've been learning and struggling together since last fall to understand how the sin of racism has made its way into our lives in particular ways in this country over the centuries. These are hard conversations that these people have been showing me can be had with truthfulness and vulnerability and kindness.

This week we were struggling with some ideas in a book by the great 20th century theologian Howard Thurman titled *Jesus and the Disinherited*. It is a brilliant book I can't recommend highly enough. Thurman says that one way the weak have always defended themselves from those in power is by deception. He notes we even observe this in nature. A mother bird will pretend to have a broken wing to distract a predator from her young and the cuttlefish will release fluid from its sepia bag, clouding the water around it to escape. But for human beings, there is a cost to using deception to protect ourselves. "The penalty of deception," says Thurman, "is to *become* a deception." The penalty of deception is to become a deception. Look around and tell me that's not still true of our world.

The word Thurman uses for the alternative to deception that Jesus presents us with, is sincerity. He described sincerity as the kind of action that arises truthfully in a person based on one's relation to God, not in response to the powerful person exercising control over us. But its purpose is ultimately not to make each of us pure before God in our motives. The purpose of

learning this way of sincerity or truthful action is that it breaks the chain of hypocrisy and violence by refusing to let the powerful one determine who you are and how you will respond.

Thurman was a mentor of Dr. King's. And it's not so hard to draw a line from his theology to the trainings in nonviolent resistance in which people learned how, with their very lives and bodies, not to let a violent and unjust world determine who they were and how they would respond to it. And the hypocrisy and injustice of that world were exposed powerfully in them.

But such heroic forms of faith are just extreme instances of simpler, everyday struggles to live lives of healing and wholeness. Hurt people hurt people, the old saying goes. Which is to say, my inclination is to pass on the hurts I receive. But there is a way of sincerity in which, with your help, and with Jesus as our guide and companion on the way, maybe my actions don't spring from my hurts quite as much today as they did yesterday. Isn't that what breaking the power of sin in our lives must also mean?

Sincerity, like baptism, can seem like a matter that's mostly between the individual soul and God. But in truth, it's a way of letting something else besides deception and violence drive our actions and our relationships with other people in a violent and deceptive world. And, in the end, whatever repentance, forgiveness, or grace baptism makes available to our lives, isn't for our own sakes. It's for the healing of this world God still loves and still hopes to make a little more whole through your life and through my life and through the life of little Everett Scofield whom we'll baptize once the preacher stops trying to explain why we might do such a thing.

Friends, I think Jesus stepped into line that day at the Jordan for the same reason Everett will be baptized into the community of Jesus today. Jesus stepped into line with all those people because the only way we can break some of the hold a violent and broken world has on our lives is together. Everett needs us and we need Everett, because we can't begin to set right what's gone wrong in us and in our world all by ourselves. In baptism we take our place among a bunch of ordinary sinners who are trying to make a little better music with their lives in this world. Maybe Everett's first contribution to the Church as a Christian today is to remind each one of us that there's a seat in this circle for you too.