

Waiting in Line

The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of our Lord

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In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

One of the skills I have learned during the pandemic is guessing which aisle at Kroger leads to the fastest checkout. Due to social distancing, the checkout lines often form way back in the aisles rather than close to the cashier so, it's difficult to compare how long the lines are. I have learned to find one of the aisles leading to checkout, commit myself to it, place my cart on the little '6 feet apart' marker on the floor, and wait to move forward to the next marker.

One day, I used my time in line to check email and I heard the young woman behind me say, 'Oh, ma'am, it looks like you only have a couple of items, you can go ahead of me.' The young woman had spotted an elderly woman going back and forth trying to figure out where the lines were forming in the aisles. I was a little embarrassed that I had not spotted her, and offered for her to move ahead of me as well. When the elderly woman made it to the cashier, she had a lot of difficulty with the technology in using her debit card and applying her coupons. She apologized to me and the young woman, and the young woman behind me said, "Oh, that's OK. Just take your time."

While waiting, the young woman joked with me about some of the items in our carts to help pass the time. When the elderly woman finished checking out, she gave the two of us the most beautiful smile and a heartfelt thank you.

While my appointments before and after shopping and my emails during shopping were about forming community here at Calvary, a little community of three was being formed right before my eyes at Kroger. And my two fellow community members each taught me something. The young woman taught me the beauty of noticing someone who feels out of place, offering her hospitality and a preferred place in line, and making her feel at ease. The elderly woman taught me the power of persistence, how to graciously receive the help of others, and how to express gratitude with genuine warmth. Surprisingly I found community that day by waiting in line.

Of the three accounts of the baptism of Jesus, only today's Gospel of Luke gives us the most sense that his baptism was part of a communal baptism. Luke reports, 'Now when all the people were baptized, and Jesus was *also* baptized.' We can picture that Jesus may have offered to wait in line for all the others to be baptized. Or his cousin, John the Baptist, even after describing the special nature of the Messiah, may have instructed Jesus, 'Well, get in line.'

It seems significant that Jesus's first recorded public act as an adult involved waiting in line. There is something humbling and very human about that. Jesus knew that the baptisms of the others ahead of him in line mattered and marked turning points in each person's life. Everyone in line before him had a different story that led them to come to a strange-looking man in the wilderness to be washed in a muddy river. Much like the little tributaries and streams that fed the Jordan, the story of each person flowed into each other that day as they became one repentant community that would look after each other and seek to look after our shared world. That is what Jesus was baptized into that day.

The question is often posed, 'If baptism is about being cleansed from our sins and Jesus is sin-free, then why does Jesus need or want to be baptized?' Some have answered this question by saying that Jesus wants to identify and show solidarity with the rest of us sinners in line. But I believe he has a deeper motive than that. Jesus wants to become fully immersed in our lives. By waiting in line, he honors the norm of the community - the community in which he wants to be fully enmeshed. He wants to be an abiding presence and a change agent within us. He wants to be a companion, waiting in line with the rest of us.

Henri Nouwen was a Catholic priest, professor, and a sought-after spiritual director, speaker, and writer. He had reached the pinnacle of the academic world, having served on the faculties of Yale and Harvard Divinity Schools. But there was something unsettling to him.

To extend the 'waiting in line' metaphor, it seemed as though he was on the outside, observing the people in the line, rather than being in the line himself. Henri longed for a more communal life and a more basic ministry. He uprooted his life and lived for a year in France in a community for intellectually and developmentally differently-abled persons. Henri was invited to be pastor for a sister community in Toronto, and spent the last ten years of his life in ministry there.

He was asked to help Adam get ready for his day each morning. Adam was a young man with epilepsy and never learned to speak, but he could follow instructions. Even though he couldn't speak, he would let Henri know when he felt that Henri was hurrying him or wasn't fully present with him. Henri wrote of this: "A few times when I was so pushy, he responded by having a grand mal seizure, and I realized it was his way of saying, 'Slow down, Henri! Slow down.' Adam was communicating with me, and he was consistent in reminding me that he wanted and needed me to be with him unhurriedly and gently."

For Henri, Adam became
his friend,
his teacher,
his guide.

Henri added: "Being so close with Adam I realized that the 'Christ event' is much more than something that took place long ago. It occurs every time spirit greets spirit in the body. It is a sacred event happening in the present because it is God's event among people. That is what the sacramental life is all about."

Much like Adam, Jesus does not say a word in Luke's account of his baptism. He simply offers his body to be immersed by his cousin John, and then he quietly prays to his Father. And much like Adam taught Henri, and the elderly and young woman taught me, Jesus teaches us all the beauty and joy of immersing ourselves in community by learning the art of waiting in line. *Amen.*