

Epiphany 1C: Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

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One of the most consequential events in my life was a minor four-wheeler accident. I wasn't involved directly. In fact, I was living outside Tacoma when it took place back in Arkansas. Ardelle was dating a guy named John who took her for a ride on his ATV and decided it might be fun to drive up the front steps of a college dormitory. And when he did, they flipped over backwards and Ardelle tumbled off. Then, while she was still checking for breaks and bruises, John said she needed to jump back on, lest she be scared of four-wheelers forever. I won't quote her verbatim in a church. But let's just say Ardelle told that guy in no uncertain terms that she wasn't about to get back on his four-wheeler. And, before long, she realized maybe she didn't want to ride though life next to him either. So she broke things off. Which meant she was unattached when I moved back to town. And we're still living in the happily ever after.

Ardelle is a psychotherapist, so she'd know much more about this than I. But I suppose dear old John was proposing a form of exposure therapy at the foot of those steps. Maybe you're familiar with the concept. If you have a phobia about something, it might be helped by exposing yourself to the thing you're scared of, a little bit at a time, until your fear isn't quite so debilitating. But exposure therapy is just one way of addressing the mystery of what moves us through life. And, even though I'm hardly an objective commentator on the incident, I think it's fair to say that the fear of a guy who drives four-wheelers up dormitory steps is a healthy and possibly lifesaving fear. I mean, I don't even think you should get over your fear of driving in the right lane of Poplar. If you've got to be over there, stay terrified if you want to stay alive. Some fears are instructive.

But what if all therapy — that is, all attempts to heal and flourish and grow into living the abundant lives Jesus called us to live — what if all therapy is exposure therapy, in a way. That is, what if one way of describing the Christian spiritual path is to discern what energies I will expose myself to, so that they become the fuel to the little fire that is my life in God's world for whatever time I've been given to live?

Each year, on the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we read the story of Jesus's baptism by his cousin John in the Jordan River. Each year it brings up the problem of Jesus's sinlessness according to Christian tradition. Whatever the ritual washing was that John was offering — and it's not entirely clear which Jewish practice this might have been an expression of — Christians have long wondered what Jesus needed to be cleansed of. I bring the question up only to say it's not what's caught my attention this time through the lectionary. I'm more curious about Jesus exposing his life to all sorts of lives in all sorts of conditions, including all those people at the Jordan. People who, we can assume, did show up to experience some kind of cleansing or healing they believed they were in need of. Jesus stepped in line with all of them. Whatever else it meant, his ministry began with the simple act of exposure of one life to another, which we call companionship.

From not long after that day, for more than 2,000 years now, the Christian branch of the Jewish family tree has been baptizing people. What are we doing when we do that?

Well, it's true that baptism is an initiation rite. It's a ritual in which we welcome someone sacramentally into the Christian faith and family. So, in one sense, each person who is baptized is simply stepping into a line, like Jesus at the Jordan, with all of us other Christians over time, the living and the dead.

But this fellowship of Christian people across the centuries is a particular kind of community trying to live and flourish in a particular kind of way. What our baptismal liturgy says is that, in Baptism, "...we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit." This is a mystery I happen to believe in as literally as such language can be understood. The mystery that, in baptism, we are exposed, in real and powerful and maybe life saving ways, to the grace made present to this world in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and exposed to the Holy Spirit of God, who Jesus promised would still live among us once he was gone.

So what is that grace? What is that divine energy baptism exposes us to? Let's start with the situation it's said to address. What I do not believe is that, in the beginning, God set a trap for a woman and a man in a garden, and that God cursed all the people who came after them because they failed that first couple's test of obedience. What does make great sense to me, and to life in this world as I've experienced it, is that people have been grasping and blaming and shaming and covering themselves up and wounding each other as far back in time as we can see or even imagine. And when one human is wounded, he inevitably passes some of that hurt on to somebody else. "Hurt people hurt people," is the old cliché that remains about as certain as any truth a human can tell. Look around.

Christians have understood the doctrine of original sin in some pretty awful and damaging ways. But the kernel of wisdom I think it still bears is simply that your sins and mine don't originate in us. They have a backstory. I pass along hurts and wrongs that were done to me in large ways and small. Sometimes I do so in revenge that I try to send right back at the person who wronged or injured me. But I often pass along my pain with much less precision. You know how hatred and bitterness and shame move. They can be less like an arrow that hits its target, and more like a fog that spreads and envelops whatever or whomever happens to be nearby.

Well, the heart of Christian hope and faith is that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, this violent, age-old exchange of hurts and vengeance actually stopped. Completely. Even when the empire sentenced him to death, Jesus refused to send any of the evil he received back out into the world. In him, sin's diabolical cycle that had been ricocheting between lives since the beginning, came to a halt.

To the end, Jesus was simply living out what he'd been teaching us all along. Turning the other cheek, forgiving enemies, praying for those who persecute us, removing the log in our eye before inspecting the splinter in our neighbor's... These aren't arbitrary ethical tests to be passed in order to please a God so much as ways of practicing freedom from the violent and vengeful ways of this world. They are ways of living as though God's merciful kingdom has already come and God's gracious will is already being done.

In baptism, we are buried with Jesus in the death of that deadly old cycle, and raised to a new life of grace. It's exposure, if you will, to the grace that was present when Jesus returned

only love and forgiveness and mercy to a sinful and broken world, even as that world was giving him its worst. Isn't that the energy you want to expose your life to in the deepest places of yourself, so that you and I might live lives according to another way? So that you and I might live as citizens of a different realm, even here, even now?

Friends, this is why I come to church. This is why I need the sacraments, especially to renew my baptismal promises and to receive the grace of Jesus's body and blood here with all of you. I don't want my life to be driven by the vengeful stuff that drives too much of this world. It's why I need to sing with you and confess with you and learn with you and serve people in need with you in whatever ways we can in Jesus's name. I need constant exposure to the way of love if the habits of my heart are to change, even a little. Don't you?

Each year we take a Sunday to remember Jesus's baptism, in order to wonder about how baptism and the sacramental life might still matter to lives like ours. It wouldn't be Christian to say that God's grace is limited to the Christian sacraments. Who's to say how, where, and when God's grace might be present. But if you're anything like me, you can forget every day that grace really is available to each one of us each time we receive the bread and wine of communion. Each time we baptize another human soul into the death of vengeance and the resurrection of perfect love in Jesus. As we step into another year of life on Earth together, perhaps one resolution we could make is to take seriously what energies we let our lives be exposed to. And then commit to return, over and again, week after week, to be nourished and transformed by these living sacraments to the way, not of violence, but of love.