

## **“Baptism that Makes a Difference”**

**Luke 3:15-22**

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**Baptism of the Lord**

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He was bigger and older than me, but on this particular day he didn't deserve my respect. I don't remember how the argument began but he crossed the line with the first joke about my mother. “Your momma's so dumb she tripped over a cordless phone.” In the second grade there was plenty of leeway given for reasonable ridicule, but everyone knew that talking about someone else's mother was a declaration of war. I should have known better than to stoop to his level especially given my featherweight status, but my mother's honor was on the line. Plus, I had been wronged. Surely justice would be on my side. “Well, your mama's so ugly when she joined an ugly contest, they said ‘Sorry, no professionals.’” The poetry slam escalated from there into full blown fisticuffs. By the end of my walk from school to home, I was nursing a bloody nose, a black eye, and my shattered sense of justice. There are some powers that you have to defer to even when they don't deserve it.

John the Baptist found this out the hard way. Herod had either stolen or wooed away his half-brother's wife, Herodias, divorcing his first wife to make room for the second. John the Baptist denounced him for this abuse of power. Herod shut him up in prison. In Matthew's gospel we learn that the daughter of Herodias, Salome, has John executed and his head delivered on a plate. Apparently, it's a bad idea to talk about someone else's momma in more than one culture. Yet even when there's truth in the critique, power is what usually wins the day.

I see it everyday. Not just in playground insults, but in cultures of honor and power. Anyone who's ever gone to school, or served in an academic department, or had to raise their own grant money knows that power demands respect even when it's not deserved. Anyone who's ever rushed a sorority or fraternity, who's ever run for public office, who's ever served in management knows that there are some rings that demand a kiss, some egos that require a stroke, some powers that command deference even when it's not right, even when it's not fair.

Sooner or later, most of us are forced to submit to power either by retreating from its spheres or by sacrificing some of our integrity. I suppose there are some who find it easy to make peace with that reality. But there are others of us who don't ever get comfortable with those choices. We're bothered when somebody gets power we know they don't deserve. We're disturbed when people who do the right things don't get rewarded for it. We're upset by the choices between power and integrity that we shouldn't have to make in the first place.

I imagine that the people who come to see John aren't comfortable with these choices, either. Perhaps they come to the wilderness because they've heard that John might have something novel to offer. In a culture of honor where the most powerful appear to be the most safe, the most secure, they've come to see what kind of alternative protection, alternative power, alternative safety John might guarantee. In a culture that demands that they step aside when power throws its weight around on the playground of their lives, they've come to hear how John thinks they can they survive with their integrity *and* their front teeth intact.

The people were filled with expectation because John's talk was fearless, as though the world had changed and they merely had to wake up to this reality. Forget what you heard about

being anxious about your retirement. You have two coats, share one with someone who doesn't. Forget chasing after the next big windfall. You have food, share with those who don't. Forget the rules that say if it's legal it must be right – don't take advantage of anyone even if the law allows it. Forget the old boy network that keeps wealth in the hands of a few – live a different way right now because you can. John spoke as though the people didn't have to defer to powers that don't deserve respect, or leaders that don't deserve esteem, or systems that don't deserve admiration. As though their water baptism had turned the world upside down. It's easy to see how the people were so filled with expectation.

But the people also question in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah. They question whether he and his talk can really heal them, can really help them, can really save them. No one wants to be the first guinea pig to try to live without deferring to the powers. No one wants to be the test case for a different way in a culture of honor backed by violence. No one wants to be the featherweight who risks finding out if justice really is on your side. The people question in their hearts concerning John. Can we really share everything and not get burned? Can we really love all the time and not end up hurt? Can we really count on justice being served and not get kicked to the curb? Can we really live like John boasts and not end up penniless, or hopeless, or worse?

The people question in their hearts but I doubt their questioning lasts for long. Soon enough their suspicions and their doubts are confirmed. John tells the truth as he sees it, and it lands him in prison. Soon enough his head is on the platter. Soon enough, we learn, John is no different than any of us. He pays the price just like we would if we were as bold as he.

It's a disappointment. Another disappointment for people searching for alternatives. They had wanted him to be different. That's what many of us who hold onto hope look for: we look for someone who's different. Someone with a different kind of just and loving power that can contend with the powers we know too well. Someone so strong he will not ever have to hedge on what is right. Someone so powerful she will not have to defer to anyone. Someone so righteous he won't have to compromise any bit of his integrity.

It's another disappointment - a familiar feeling to people looking for alternatives. I hear some disappointments: disappointed in a president; disappointed in a lover; disappointed in a friend; disappointed in a mayor; disappointed in a mentor; disappointed in a pastor. Disappointed in a Savior. Disappointed by the injustices that carry on around us because we run out of energy, or time, or power to make the changes we wish to see. We look for someone who will be different, untouched by the compromises that we all know too well. Untouched by the concessions that we know we shouldn't have to make. We want so badly to find a Savior who is different, yet experience tells us that different is hard to find.

And yet when John is gone and the limelight shifts to Jesus, Jesus doesn't try to prove himself *different*. The one who John has promised really is the Messiah, the Savior, the one who will redeem the world - Jesus doesn't do or say anything to prove himself different. He gets in line for the plain old water baptism. He gets in line behind the rest of the people – behind every last one of them. The one with the winnowing fork in hand, the one who is promised to clear the threshing floor, to burn the chaff, waits his turn like everybody else for a regular washing. And that simple act – the one that's just what everyone else who is hoping, and praying, and searching for a different way is doing – that simple act *is* what makes the difference.

The power that Jesus offers comes not in separating himself from people, elevating himself above them, but in standing with them. Grace is received not from on high, but from the last place in line. Strength is found not in the action of One, but in the coming together of many. The alternative power, the alternative protection, the alternative safety, that alternative power that you've been looking for, Jesus seems to say, it doesn't come from standing alone, it comes from standing together.

That's a lot of what baptism is. You get washed with the same old water that you always use for washing. What's different is you wind up in a community – in solidarity - with a lot of other people who desperately want to survive this world with their integrity *and* their front teeth intact. People who want to share, who want to love, who want to live righteous lives.

On the PBS special this week about our emotional lives, one segment featured the psychology of bullying. Research was shared on what stops bullying before it leads to violence and sometimes suicide. Researchers have found that if you want to stop bullying before it starts, before it leads to violence, the most effective way is not a leader or another adult exerting their power, the most effective way is other kids saying together this is not funny. This has gone too far. It takes a community.

It almost always does. It's the only thing that will stop the decades-long drumbeat of death among the youth in our city – a community of people standing together and prioritizing their future. It's the only thing that will stop the murders in El Salvador – a community of people – Salvadorans, Americans, Canadians and others demanding justice now. It's the only thing that will end a war, change a health care system, make marriage accessible to all who seek it, or give us courage in our daily work even when doing what is right comes with a cost.

It's the community of people bound together because they have committed themselves to God's way in the world. People who have committed themselves to finding an alternative way to live. An alternative way that doesn't defer to power that doesn't deserve deference, that doesn't trade integrity for status, that doesn't have to become the bully that it seeks to defeat.

And I know that baptism isn't a get out of jail free card. John knows. Jesus knows. Some of us have shared and been taken. Some of us have loved and lost. Some of us have done the right thing and paid dearly for it. Jesus knows. You can't always survive this world with your integrity *and* your front teeth intact. Sometimes you are sent home with a black eye and a bloody nose. Sometimes you sent home knowing that you bowed down to power that didn't deserve it.

Yet even then, especially then, it's the community that will nurse those wounds and help you learn from them. It's the community that will stand you up on your feet again. It's the community that will walk you back into the world and let you feel a different kind of holy, communal power. It's the community that will still be here when you get home, bloodied and bruised. Home from work where you struggled to do the right thing. Home from school where you know you must stand up for kid who needed it. Home from El Salvador or Cameroon or Pine Ridge where you don't have to look far to see brothers and sisters beaten down by the

powers. Home from the hospital where you discovered what true fear really is. Home from wherever you find yourself alone, beaten down, disappointed, fearful and afraid.

You find yourself home, in the community that first washed you with plain old water and called you by your name – precious, beloved, child of God. It's God's community that makes the difference.

There is always water in the font. And last time I checked, the line is not that long.