

“The Lord Who Waits in Line”

Introduction: Given that our annual men’s retreat is now just a few months away, I have been in email contact about several items with Sister Kate, the woman at the Marie Joseph Spiritual Center who manages group retreats. When I jokingly told her that I had now begun one of my favorite rituals, that of assessing interest in the retreat and collecting payment for it, she wrote: “I’ll be praying for your men...with all that has happened this past year, everyone needs a time out to be nourished by our loving God.” I so appreciate the ministry of the sisters up there in Biddeford, especially the way they regularly and intentionally pray for everyone who comes.

As I was thinking about her comment, and about all that has happened in our nation and in our world that can leave us discouraged, it seemed to dovetail nicely with a statement the prophet Isaiah makes in our OT lesson, in the first of four passages about a figure known as the servant of the LORD. The line that held my attention was this: “He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.” How encouraging that statement is! God is interested in what happens on earth and will work and persevere until all is well. But how, on earth, will that happen?!

It happens through Jesus, the one whom these servant passages, or songs, anticipate. And it happens through us, those who take up his call to follow this servant in a servant-like way. We can begin to see this “epiphany” in the event we’ll reflect on today – the baptism of Jesus. In his baptism we see revealed both the identity of Jesus, as well as, by extension, our own. Let’s begin with his.

I. The Identity of Jesus

A. As we do, what was going on down at the River Jordan? Well, there were a bunch of people standing in line, waiting their turn to wade into the river and get baptized. They had gone there to hear a prophet-like character named John preach, and then get baptized by him. John had come, so the news had spread, to announce, and to prepare people for, the coming of the Messiah, the one whom God had promised to send to restore all things. In fact, some were wondering if John might actually be this Messiah, but John explained that there was so much difference between the two that he was not even worthy to untie the strap of this coming one’s sandal. John’s baptism was a simple declaration of repentance. The more powerful baptism that this Messiah would bring involved the Holy Spirit, and the power for faithful living, as well as fire, purification if you were willing to walk with him and judgment if you were not.

B. Imagine, then, the shock of discovering that this Messiah, was standing in line, knee deep in the muddy water, waiting to be baptized, too. It would be like, on a Sunday morning, when we’re receiving communion by intinction, having Jesus slip out of the pew across the aisle from you and stand in the line that was slowly making its way with you to the table of the Lord. Wait, but that’s not right, you think. He *is* the Lord. If anything, he should be serving. Why would he need to receive from his own table? Why (going back to the river) would he need to get baptized, especially if it’s a baptism that has to do with repentance of sin and Jesus, we learn and observe throughout his life, is without sin? Some have humorously suggested that his mother made him do it! While Mary was certainly a strong figure in his life, she did not have that kind of control over him, as we will see next week (Jn. 2:1-11).

C. Better is to listen in on the conversation Matthew records between John and Jesus when the two meet in the river. John tries to stop the proceedings saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” In response, Jesus says this: “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness” (Ma. 3:14-15). Jesus knew that his mission – to bring about justice and righteousness – would involve such a close identification with us as human beings that he would need to actually take on our sin and die our death in order to make it happen, all of which baptism symbolizes. As Paul would later explain: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). It’s as if, standing in line with us, and then coming to stop knee deep in that muddy water, Jesus was saying: “I have come to be as one of you. I have come to identify with you.” Jesus knows who we are. Jesus knows what we need. Jesus is committed to the Father’s plan to bring about new life in us and so enters deeply into our lives, even taking on our sin.

D. That’s certainly a tall order! How can he do this without faltering or becoming discouraged, without getting tired and quitting? The passage in Isaiah anticipates the two things that happen after Jesus was baptized which enable him to carry out his mission: The Father’s delight and the empowering of the Spirit. They happen, we should notice, as Jesus was praying. There’s a lot we can say about this, but I’ll only observe today that if prayer was important for Jesus to receive the Father’s affirmation and empowerment, so is it important for us! Waiting for God to move does not mean just sitting around; waiting involves praying. And such movement did come. It came as “heaven was opened.” This phrase in the Bible signifies that divine revelation or action is about to happen.

1. The first thing to happen was the descent of something *like* a dove. This descent indicated that Jesus was going to be empowered in his ministry by, and so would need to rely upon, the Holy Spirit. Peter, one of the disciples who walked with Jesus throughout his ministry, observed the truth of this empowering as he tried to explain the power and ministry of Jesus to some onlookers: “You know what has happened . . . after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Ac. 10:37f). Jesus did not falter or get discouraged because he was ministering in the greatest power there is: the power of the living God, the power of the Holy Spirit.

2. The second thing to happen when heaven was opened was the affirmation that the Father would not only empower Jesus, he would delight in him; he would be with him in love: “You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Significantly, as far as his mission was concerned, Jesus hadn’t done anything yet, but the Father affirmed that he loved his Son anyway. This is pure grace. Jesus learned from the get-go that he wouldn’t have to earn the Father’s love but that it was his, as gift. Whatever he would go on to do, it would be as a response to that love, not as a requirement for it. Knowing and resting in the Father’s love would therefore be a huge part, along with relying on the Spirit’s power, of carrying out his mission. Yes, the word “Son” affirms that Jesus is the Messiah (cf. Psalm 2). But he would be a messiah whose power would be expressed not in the advancement of an army, or the rise and fall of a stock market, but through suffering and sacrifice. Isaiah describes such in his fourth servant passage: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed (53:5).

In his baptism, then, we learn that Jesus came to identify with us, even standing in line with us, sinful though we are, and that he would be enabled to bring about justice and righteousness in a self-

sacrificing way through the love of the Father and the power of the Spirit. What, then, might this have to do with helping us understand our identity and joining him in his mission?

II. Our Cross-Shaped Identity

A. We can seek our identity in any number of ways, most of which leave us vulnerable to disappointment or despair. We can seek our identity through the affirmation or love of another, such as a spouse, a parent, or a child. Or, we can seek our identity through achieving success at work, or through some other accomplishment. Or, we can try to create an identity through the excluding others in some way, thinking of them as bad and us, therefore, as good. The first category leaves us vulnerable to the failure of others to love us fully and as we need, the second leaves us vulnerable to our own failure to achieve, and the third prevents us from loving our neighbor, and our enemy, as Jesus has called us to. The only identity that will sustain us and not be subject to what others think about us or what we think of ourselves, is what some have called a cross-shaped identity. It's an identity that comes from faith in the one who stood in the line of baptism with us. It's based on the unconditional love of God. It's an identity that says we're accepted and loved based not on what we've done, but on what Jesus has done. It's not based on what others think of us or what we think of ourselves, but on what God thinks of us.

Paul describes it this way, as he struggled with the proper source of identity in his own life. He prayed: ". . . that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law [self-effort], but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith" (Phil. 3:8f). If we have been adopted into the family of faith through the ministry of the Son, we can begin to hear what he heard: "You are my beloved Son/Daughter; with you I am well pleased." And we can begin to live our new life in his power, the power of the Holy Spirit.

B. What the cross does is humble us and rip us out of our egotism, as we see our own sin and need for forgiveness. At the same time it secures us in the love that God has for us, so that we can embrace and love the other rather than exclude them or even hate them in some way. All of this is especially critical to keep in mind and to live by in a world which is so caught up in a battle between "them" and "us."

A week ago Saturday I went to the Hamilton-Wenham High School to donate blood. The email from the Red Cross said it was a blood drive in honor of a man named Ted Bucci. I don't know Ted; it was just a convenient day and time for me to donate. But as it turned out – not so much! I arrived at 10:45 and the entire cafeteria seemed like it was filled with Buccis. I guess it must be a large family! I signed in and was told to take a seat, along with a dozen or so other people. In all of my years of giving blood, I think I've only waited ten minutes before being called to begin the process, but that day I waited over an hour. It didn't help that my cell phone battery decided at that moment to run out of juice, or that those who had already donated were walking around with donuts and coffee and pizza slices! As the minutes ticked by, I became more and more frustrated, and was even tempted to get up and leave. How different it might have been had I remembered that Jesus was there, waiting too, in line with me.

Jesus, in his baptism, identifies with us; he knows who we are; he even stands in line with us and promises to keep standing until all things have been renewed. May we know and receive the identity that he brings to us and begin to live from it, that we may so stand in line with others.