

This Might Get Messy!

[Text - Mark 1:4-11]

Pastor Dave Shackle

January 11, 2015

Today is the day the Church commemorates the Baptism of Jesus. It's also called the First Sunday after the Epiphany - *Epiphany* meaning "to shine light upon, or reveal". Jesus's baptism is an important step in his personal "epiphany", because it shines a light on who he is, and what his entire ministry will entail. We know very little about Jesus' life, until the day he shows-up at the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Therefore, his baptism is truly a significant part of his "epiphany" - his "revelation" as the Christ - God's Anointed One.

Beginning with his baptism - the launching point of his public ministry - and continuing throughout his life, Jesus reveals a genuine desire to connect with the full spectrum of Human Life. This is something that is often lost in today's spiritualized, sanitized image of Jesus; but it's a quality that isn't lost on his adversaries, or his closest friends. Jesus' detractors often try to discredit him as a carousing and corrupt reveler - a kind of 1st Century Johnny Manziel - running with the wrong crowd, and enjoying the physical pleasures of Life way too much. And even his own followers try to keep Jesus away from those people or situations that might prove embarrassing, unsavory, or "inappropriate". Yet through it all, Jesus chooses to embrace the fullness of Life, just as it comes to him. And he demonstrates, time and again, his desire to touch and taste and experience all that Life has to offer - including those less-than-immaculate things that come with it.

One classic example of this, is when parents bring their children to Jesus, to bless them. His disciples immediately blast those parents, resenting this interruption of Jesus' serious, "spiritual" mission. And while this may seem strange to us today, what with the way politicians love to kiss and cuddle those cute little bundles of joy; back in Jesus' day, the attitude toward children was radically different. There wouldn't be any children's sermon in the ancient synagogue, because any

public discourse of the Sacred Scriptures was strictly reserved for men - certainly not women, and definitely not children!

That's why the disciples rebuke those parents for intruding upon Jesus' important, dignified work. But Jesus completely turns this around, telling them all - in no uncertain terms - that the Divine Realm belongs *primarily* to these vulnerable, little ones. Then, to further demonstrate his point, Jesus scoops those children into his arms, holds and hugs them tightly, and lovingly blesses them all! And remember, this was back in the Pre-Pamper Period! There were no Huggies on those huggable infants! Yet there Jesus sits with those lively, messy bundles-of-joy on his lap! And he tells those adults who want to push-aside those little ones, that the Holy Realm which they seek, may actually be discovered among these little ones. And any Big-shot, Big-Person, who wants to take part in this Realm, must also receive It like a little child!

Jesus fully understands that the only way anyone can receive and participate in the Realm of God, is by accepting that Realm as a Divine Gift. Too often, the older we get, and the more sophisticated we become, the easier it is to misconstrue this Gift. We see it as something exclusive to us, and to those who are like us. We approach it as something that is ours to keep and control. And instead of receiving this gift with the joy and excitement of a child, we mature martyrs take it on as our own personal cross to bear. Rather than accepting this marvelous Gift with open hands and hearts, and freely sharing it with others, we grasp it tightly and carefully try to maintain it for ourselves.

Sometimes we adults are too suspicious or too afraid to accept anything, unless it is neat and clean and logical and manageable. However, Life simply isn't like that! Human Life begins with water breaking and blood flowing, pain and messiness, extreme vulnerability and deep-seated emotion. And Life usually ends with a similar scenario. Yet in-between, in our attempt to sanitize or spiritualize this sensual, living Gift, we often miss-out on those down-to-earth opportunities and people that can truly enrich our lives. Our fear of getting messy or emotional or "defiled" causes us to try to strictly

control our lives, as well as the lives of all those around us. Yet the tighter we take hold, the more we smother and stifle Life's genuine essence and vitality. Fortunately, Jesus Christ shines his Light on a much more freeing and fulfilling way for us to go.

By standing in the murky water of the Jordan River, by scooping-up those little children, by kneeling-down to wash the dirt from his disciples' feet, and by struggling and sweating under a rough wooden cross, Jesus demonstrates an absolute willingness to get wet and dirty, vulnerable and bloodied - to identify completely with Life's cycle of pain and pleasure, joy and sorrow, learning and growing, living and dying. And by accepting the totality of Life, Jesus shows us that those neat little categories we use to compartmentalize our lives, are both unnecessary *and* counterproductive. That's why Saint Paul later writes, that those who have been baptized into Christ Jesus will put away those "grown up" distinctions between Jew and Greek, Slave and Free, Male and Female. And I would add Christian and Non-Christian, Black and White, Young and Old, Conservative and Liberal, Gay and Straight. Because, as Paul explains, "There is no distinction! For we are all One, in Christ Jesus!"

Now sadly, this Gift of Baptism - this Sign of the Divine Truth, that we are all equal within the Human Family - is actually used to set-up new barriers between God's people. There are churches that insist, "Unless you baptize in *this* particular way, using these specific words, your baptism isn't valid and you are doomed!" Personally, I'm glad that in the United Church of Christ, there is no age limit, strict requirement, or set formula for receiving Holy Baptism. This indicates that Baptism truly is a Divine *Gift* - initiated and validated by the Giver, not by those who receive it nor those who administer it. Though I can appreciate those churches where adults are taken to the river and plunged into the water. That's a beautiful, symbolic representation. I just think they should hold them under a little bit longer! Come on, if they insist that Baptism capture that experience of a sinful person dying to the old ways, and rising-up to a brand-new life, then they should do it up big! ["In the name of the Father.....and of the Son.....What, still kicking? O.K., one more time for the Holy Ghost!"]

And one other sad and strange thing, is that many of those who insist on a completely saturated and messy mode of Baptism, often leave that untidy attribute in the water; and from that point forward, try to project a squeaky-clean, holier-than-possible Illusion of Life. It's as if to say, "Now that I've given my life to God, God's gonna keep me high above Life's messy problems and paradoxes, and separate from those sinful, sensual and secular people." Yet that's not how it was for Jesus Christ. *Because* he gives his life fully to God, Jesus lives and moves and identifies with society's most shady people and humblest poor; he touches and blesses their runny-nosed children; and he stands in firm opposition to any self-righteous individual who would seek to condemn or harm God's vulnerable and precious "little" ones.

This is God's Beloved Child - with whom God is well pleased! And Jesus Christ is the One who shows you and me how to truly embrace Life, and live it fully and faithfully:
By being open and authentic and available to one another;
By honestly facing the messy and "undignified" things that are a part of us all;

By gathering the children into *our* arms, and embracing those seemingly “lesser” people with grace and compassion;
By faithfully taking-on the wet and dirty, bloody and earthy totality of Life - trusting that our loving Heavenly Parent will hold us ever-secure - in our living, in our dying, and one more time in our rising-up to newness of life.