

Baptism of Our Lord A (1/12/2020)

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism is the indelible mark of God's favor, a fundamental dignity that mitigates the impulse to posture, to jostle for position, to dominate. It's a seal of approval, God's assurance of enduring love for you. So, it's the motivation for all patience, all attentiveness, all mercy, characteristics of both Jesus' leadership and the leadership of any who are called by God.

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, [says the LORD,
 my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
 I have put my spirit upon him;
 he will bring forth justice to the nations.
 He will not cry or lift up his voice,
 or make it heard in the street;
 a bruised reed he will not break,
 and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
 he will faithfully bring forth justice.
 He will not grow faint or be crushed
 until he has established justice in the earth;
 and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

We are desperate for this kind of leadership.

In our first reading today, the prophet Isaiah paints a portrait of gentle power, the kind that preserves the bruised reed, that fans the dying flame, that sustains the weakest hope. It's the embodiment of God's own merciful power, and as such it's the mark of God's chosen servant, the one who is capable of realizing God's justice, whose wisdom promises to enlighten peoples near and far.

Yet, how often do we see leadership informed by mercy? How often do we see power wed to gentleness? Not often. No, conventional power is blustering and forceful. It has no patience for vulnerability. It takes no

prisoners, so it has no need to attend to them. In service of its aims, conventional power will not hesitate to crush the bruised reed, to snuff out the dimly burning wick. Thus, it pays no heed to the widow and the orphan, it suppresses any perceived threat to its supremacy, and it feeds the flames of violence.

It's a longstanding tragedy, yet we have been conditioned to believe that wielding this kind of power is the only way to secure our lives. **If there's only so much peace to go around, we'd better stake a claim to our share, even if it means sacrificing others. Our well-being can only be guaranteed by force, so the ends justify the means.**

Why can't we entertain the possibility that the prophet of God is right? Why do we resist the way of the Lord's chosen servant?

For Christians, Isaiah's portrait of gentle power is the portrait of Jesus. He is the one in whom God delights and on whom God has set the Spirit. **He attends to the weak and the outcast, and serves the cause of God's justice by means of mercy. And, he is finally crushed on account of the challenge he poses to other powers, but not before establishing the way of peace, the way of abundant life.**

What makes the difference? What is the basis for Jesus' faithfulness to the ways of God? Our Gospel from Matthew today tells the famous story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan by John:

Just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Have you noticed that this episode takes place before Jesus has achieved anything for God? His status as Beloved Child does not depend on any merit of his own, but only on God's outpouring of love. **Jesus' baptism, in other words, is the definitive sign of God's faithfulness to him, and an enduring source of security as he begins the work to which he's called.**

Joined to Christ in Holy Baptism, we stand under the same divine affirmation. You are God's beloved children, friends, with you God is well pleased. Neither failure nor accomplishment, neither defeat nor victory, neither loss nor gain can change your status in God's sight. And, since you already enjoy God's favor, you don't need to impose yourself on others in order to prove your worth. Your cup overflows with God's mercy, so you are liberated for the work of mercy.

When I think of the quiet power that emerges from this kind of security, I can't help but think of The Reverend Fred Rogers. Mister Rogers spoke gently, but with an undeniable influence. In 1969, he testified before the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee in an effort to secure \$20 million to support the growth of national public television. His aim, as he identified it, was to encourage a greater "neighborhood expression of care":

This is what I give, I give an expression of care every day to each child to help him realize that he is unique. I end the program by saying, "You've

made this day a special day by just your being you. There's no person in the whole world like you, and I like you just the way you are."¹

His testimony was a resounding success. What do you imagine was the source of his sincerity and determination? What made Mister Rogers so quietly compelling? He must have internalized the message he received at his baptism, the promise that both held him in grace and empowered him to walk in the way of grace: *You are my beloved child, Fred; I like you just the way you are.*

Dear church, **baptism is the indelible mark of God's favor, a fundamental dignity that mitigates the impulse to posture, to jostle for position, to dominate. It's a seal of approval, God's assurance of enduring love for you. So, it's the underlying motivation for all patience, all attentiveness, all mercy, characteristics of Jesus' leadership, yes, and the leadership of any who are truly called by God.**²

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKy7ljRr0AA>.

² Stephanie A. Paulsell, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, 218.