

BAPTISMAL AFFIRMATION
Sermon, January 10, 2021
Baptism of the Lord Sunday
Text: Mark 1:4-11

Liturgically speaking, thirty years have passed since Wednesday, when we were commemorating Epiphany, the visit of the Magi to the newborn King. That newborn King is now thirty years old, presenting himself to John for baptism. John the Baptist appeared in the Judean wilderness proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." We are told his food was locusts and wild honey ... (something I learned two years ago from a book our church librarian Emmy pointed out, ... the locust is the fruit of the carob tree, in fact, it is known in the Middle East as St. John's Bread. So, it is highly likely that he didn't eat bugs after all! See attached insert.) As people responded ... and people did respond; huge numbers came from all over ... confessing their sins, John would then baptize them in the Jordan. On this day, though, one came forward who had no sin to confess. As explained in the other insert, here in His baptism (or, His ordination) Jesus is publicly accepting His calling and equipping and commissioning as God's Son and all that entails; He is publicly (and willingly) commencing His ministry, which in three short years will result in His brutal death. Whether you've realize it or not, we who are baptized in Christ are also accepting the same commission, to live and serve as God's sons, God's daughters. Now, Christian baptism is about having our sinful past washed away, but it's also about having our present identity affirmed as God's sons and daughters, and about stepping into the future embracing our calling, our commission and our equipping which that identity entails. I'd like to focus our attention on just one aspect of this event, one I've spoken of before, but it's worth repeating.

Near the turn of the twentieth century, two altar boys served in two Roman Catholic churches thousands of miles from each other. One was born May 7, 1892 in the little Croatian village of Kumrovec. The other was born just three years and a day later in El Paso, Illinois (near Peoria); May 8, 1895. Though they lived very separate lives in very different parts of the world, these two altar boys had almost identical experiences. Each boy was given the opportunity to assist his parish priest in the service of Communion. And each boy, while handling the communion cup, accidentally spilled some of the wine on the carpet. There the similarities end.

The priest in the Croatian church, seeing the purple stain on the carpet, slapped the little altar boy hard, across the face, and shouted, "Clumsy oaf! Leave the altar!" That little boy left. He also left the church ... for good. That little boy grew up to become an atheist and a staunch Communist. His name was Josip Broz Tito ... the strongman dictator of Yugoslavia from 1943 to 1980. The priest in the church in Illinois, upon seeing the stain near the altar, knelt down to the little boy's level, looked him tenderly in the eyes and said, "It's all right, son. You'll do better next time. You'll be a fine priest for God someday."

And he did. That little boy grew up to become the much loved Bishop Fulton J. Sheen (known for his preaching and especially his work on television and radio, he was the first televangelist). Two young boys, similar in age, with two similar experiences, but with radically different endings. Two young boys with a universal human need: the need to be encouraged, appreciated, affirmed and loved.¹

Another story (and again, one I've shared before ... I guess that comes with growing old; I'm repeating my stories a lot): Harriett Beecher Stowe (author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) achieved her first literary triumph at the age of twelve. She was a student at Litchfield Academy in Connecticut. With the other Litchfield students, she was required to submit an essay at the end of the term. Her essay was awarded first prize by unanimous vote of the judges and was one of two essays read by the headmaster at the graduation ceremony that year. The paper was so outstanding, the audience applauded when it was read. When it was announced to everyone's surprise that twelve year old Harriett was the author (and not one of the much older graduating seniors), her dad smiled proudly from the stage. He was on that stage because he was the clergyman who had given the invocation; Lyman Beecher was the renowned pastor of the local Presbyterian church. According to Harriett Beecher Stowe's biographer, Noel Gerson, seeing her father's proud smile was a reward Harriett cherished as long as she lived. Mr. Gerson wrote, "Neither the honors nor the success she won in later life meant as much to her [as her father's smile], and, in effect, that smile determined her career."²

¹ *Mistreated*, Ron Lee Davis, Multnomah Press, Portland, OR, 1989, pp. 138-139

² *Harriett Beecher Stowe*, New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1976

Deep within the heart of every young person is the need to have a father or a mother smile and say, *"Well done. I'm proud of you. You're a good kid!"* I don't think there is a son or daughter in this world who is not thrilled by praise from a parent, regardless of age. I'm well into my sixties, and I still somewhat preen for parental affirmation from my widowed mother, I still feel the warm inner glow of confidence such affirmation has given each time it is given.

Another story: When baseball great Henry Aaron hit his 715th home run breaking Babe Ruth's remarkable record, he said in an interview: *"I don't remember the noise, or the commotion on the field. My teammates at home plate, I [sort of] remember seeing them. What I do remember is my mother out there and she hugging me. When I think back on it, that's what I remember more than anything about that home run. I don't know where she came from, but she was there."* Hank Aaron, veteran ballplayer, known and applauded by millions, but what he remembered and treasured most when he broke that record was his mother's pride and affirmation. Few of us ever escape the desire to please our parents. For some, that remains a lifelong primary motivation that drives them on to success, even though their parents may have been gone for many years. Many of us are always striving to please Dad and/or Mom. For some, sadly, that is a crushing burden to carry; some are haunted by the specter of un-affirming parents who could never be satisfied, parents whose preferred mode of "nurture" is constant "not-good-enough" criticism. No matter what they did, they could never seem to measure up, and no matter what they continue to do, they never feel they measure up to what was perceived as parental demands. For better or worse, rare is that person who does not want to please Mom or Dad.

It also works the other way. Who among us parents doesn't want our children to be proud of us? Quaker philosopher writer Rufus Jones once wrote that he spent a lifetime measuring up to the accolades of his son who died at the age of eleven. Writing more than forty years after his son's death, Jones wrote: *"I overheard him once talking with a group of playmates, when each one was telling what he wanted to be when grown up, and Lowell said when his turn came, 'I want to grow up and be a man like my daddy.' Few things in my life have ever touched me as did those words, or have given me a greater impulse to dedication. What kind of a man was I going to be, if I was to be the pattern for my boy?"* Rufus Jones became an accomplished man partially because his son was proud of him, and he wanted to live up to that honor. He didn't want to do anything to disappoint. I'm sure many of us parents can relate to that. Who doesn't want their children to be proud of them? Who wants to be the cause of a child's embarrassment or shame? What a powerful bond there is between parent and child. How we love to please one another.

I hope all parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, coaches, youth leaders and anyone else in this room who may be entrusted with the care of children will take every opportunity to tell the children in your care how proud you are of them and how thankful you are for the privilege of having them in your life! I'll add a qualifier to that: Don't do what some parents do ... when they say, "I'm proud," it sounds more like self-congratulation, as if to say *(with a pat on their own back)*, "What a great parent I am." Another qualifier: No matter how hard we work at parenting, there are so many other influences working against us; there are so many other negative factors that can come into play. Sometimes a child can lose his or her way. Sometimes a child can and will make mistakes. A child can and will make bad decisions, even with the best parenting. It's been said that between the ages of twelve and seventeen, a parent can age thirty years. But again, remember our two altar boys. Affirmation and encouragement can make all the difference.

All of this is a really long introduction to our Gospel text for the day *(but don't worry, I'm almost finished)*. Mark tells us that at Jesus' baptism Jesus and everyone else clearly heard the voice of God saying to Him, *"You are My son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased!"* What a marvelous affirmation! A father publicly and vocally and proudly pleased with his son. Yes, this was no ordinary son and this was no ordinary father, and earthly analogies can break down, but can you feel something of the humanness of Jesus on this unforgettable occasion? Something of the warmth and pleasure and elation in His heart as He receives His Father's very vocal and public affirmation of His love and pleasure? And with that approval, Jesus is launched into His public ministry.

Those of us who are or who hope to be parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, youth leaders, coaches, counselors can learn a lesson from Father God. Affirmation motivates, energizes, encourages! Those we baptize in this church are entrusted to our care, they are our family and are to be treated as such. Just as the Father-God said to Jesus on the day of His baptism, *"You are my beloved son. in you, I'm pleased!"* so should we time and again publicly affirm and encourage those entrusted to our care, assuring them of our love and pleasure. Let them know we are pleased! Pleased for the kind of young men and young women they are becoming, pleased that God has given us the privilege of having them in our lives. And in so doing we, too, might just launch them into a lifetime of ministry and service; we, too, may play an affirming and encouraging part in launching a new generation who will go on to make a redemptive and saving difference in this world.

In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. . . . And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey. Then went out to him . . . all Judea, . . . And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins. MATTHEW 3:1, 2, 4, 5, 6

The locust is the fruit of the carob tree, and accepted in the East as the food on which St. John the Baptist fed; thus it is known there as St. John's bread. It is native to the eastern Mediterranean region; the Greeks introduced it into their country as well as into Italy, while the Spaniards carried it into Mexico and South America, where it is now established. The carob is a sturdy evergreen, growing to fifty feet in height, and is of great beauty. In the early spring it produces many large clusters of tiny pea-shaped blossoms; and brown fruits follow in the form of large thick pods eight inches long. These are filled with a sweet mucilage that protects the flat bony seeds, and are very nutritious. In the East this locust fruit is laid on hurdles and dried as food that is most sustaining for cattle as well as for people. The seeds are said to be the ancient and original weight used by goldsmiths, and instituted from early times as carat weight. Each harvest, one carob tree may carry eight hundred pounds of husks.



LOCUSTS *Ceratonia siliqua*
 . . . and his meat was locusts and wild honey. MATTHEW 3:4
 Greek: kerition

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD



The Gospel accounts assert that the baptism of John was for sinners. However, a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith is that Jesus was **not** a sinner. John's baptism represented repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Being without sin, Jesus could neither repent nor receive forgiveness of sins. The baptism of John was also to "prepare the way for the Lord." However, Jesus did not need preparation for receiving Himself.

So why was Jesus baptized? The unwillingness of John the Baptist to baptize Jesus (as recorded by Matthew) indicates he was puzzled by this as well. Jesus replied to John's protest by saying, "Let it be so now, it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. What does Jesus' somewhat cryptic answer mean? One possible explanation follows:

Deuteronomy 6:25 tells us that "righteousness" involves obedience to the law of God. What Jesus seems to be saying is that He was submitting to baptism in order to obey the Old Testament law. Christ underwent the law of circumcision (*Lev. 12:3 and Luke 2:21*); He was presented in the temple (*Luke 2:22-23*); He went to the Passover (*Exodus 34:23 and Luke 2:42*); He observed the Jewish feasts commanded by the law (*Mark 14:12, Luke 22:3, John 17:10*); but what law was He obeying at His baptism?

Some scholars believe the Old Testament law Jesus was obeying by His baptism is found in Numbers 8:6-7. "Take the Levites ... and cleanse them. Thus shall you do to them to cleanse them: sprinkle water ... upon them." Who were the Levites? They were the priests in the Old Testament. The New Testament asserts that Jesus was (*and is!*) a priest; in fact, He is the ultimate High Priest for all time (*Heb. 3:1; 4:14; 5:5; 9:11*). It is quite possible that Jesus' baptism was the ceremonially prescribed act of His ordination to the high priesthood.

Although John didn't fully understand it at the time, it seems he administered to Jesus the sacramental rite that would formally set Him apart as a priest and a minister of holy things. According to the Law, three things were required before any man could become a priest: **First**, he must be thirty years of age (*Numbers 4:3, 47; Luke 3:23 explicitly makes the point that Jesus was thirty years old at His baptism*). **Second**, he must be sprinkled with water by one already a priest (*John qualified as a priest, inheriting the office from his father Zechariah, Ex. 29:9; Num. 25:13; Luke 1:5, 13*). **Third**, he must be called of God as was Aaron, the first high priest (*Ex. 28:1, Heb. 5:4-10*).

Jesus knew His calling. He waited until he was thirty years of age and then came to John to "fulfill all righteousness," that is, to meet the last demand of the Old Testament law for a priest before He began his public ministry. Just in case there was any question, God emphatically and vocally reiterates Christ's call to the highest priesthood so that all present might hear.

(Adapted from pp. 17-18, *The Meaning and Mode of Baptism*, J. Adams, PR publishing, c. 1975)