

Reflections for SJTL on the 1st Sunday after the Epiphany
(The Baptism of our Lord)
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Years ago, a fascinating novel – Watership Down – presented a great American theologian the perfect vehicle to describe who we as Christians are. The story personified a group of rabbits who happened to collect together, presumably haphazardly by chance or a variety of reasons. It took them a while to even admit to themselves, and one another, that they were on an adventure which was their life, together. Together in life, in a particular time and place, they were fashioned as authentic community, based on a life-giving story.

As typical of such a collection of people, there were tensions. Tensions about what stories from their ancestors, continued to be relevant to their survival, their thriving, and to their being together. Tensions about who would do this, and who would do that; who was a leader and who was a follower; who was better and who was weaker. Tensions that perhaps all communities exhibit, with behavior – good and bad – that perhaps is repeated over and over and over within all communities.

Among the insights Stanley Hauerwas, professor at Duke, provided were these points:

We each bring that which is unique into this community. Not a single one of us is un-gifted nor not a gift to every other. Each is a treasure for all. All are blessed, sooner or later, by each. (And so we welcome the stranger!)

We are together in this adventure that is the collection and congregation of our individual lives, and we are each far more together than any one of us, or any group of us separated off.

As we have launched into a new year, celebrating the incarnation and now moving into seeing how God is with us, how God is enfleshed among us, the first story for us is the baptism of our Lord. It is fitting to be the first story of God's showing in Jesus because it continues to be difficult for the truth about us to reach down into the very core of our being.

We each place our own obstacles to seeing, and to being for one another, the embodiment of God's love upon us and through us. We each have attitudes, habits of heart and mind, which numb our spiritual perception of ourselves and one another. We impulsively blame, judge, hold onto anger and unforgiveness, and all kinds of injuries and blindnesses that make our seeing the Big Picture from God hard to see.

We exhibit mental hostilities that arise as we live with one another. These mental hostilities make us unable to live our purposes because of the fear, suspicion, blame, and hurt we focus our attention on.

We so often do not live knowing God loves us, nor trust how much God loves us. And that is, I have come to see, the most fundamental “article of faith.” Being Christian is living in community not believing this or that or the same tenets, rather it is living together in knowing love, of God and of one another.

Perhaps there is good reason for anxiety, fear, difficulty, distractions, and anger. Certainly everyone’s reality can hold struggle, pain, loss, uncertainty, disappointment, disease, death, failure, economic tentativeness, or un-civil discourse.

Yet it is the task of this place to enable each of us to come to see, to receive the reality, the truth of God’s love upon each one of us, and therefore all of us here, and let that draw us together in this journey.

The words breaking over Jesus at his baptism, break over us here. As we recall his baptism, we are invited to allow those words break over us again and again as basic to the story that shapes us into the community we are becoming.

It is so challenging for us to keep fresh this love of our baptisms.

The words of an early-50’s man so impressed this on me. He was a good man, doing good for his family and his community. He was conscious of being at his prime, and leaving a legacy by his work, and upon his family as the children were leaving home into young adulthood. All was as it was supposed to be. Then came the diagnosis.

The bottom fell out. He was in the battle of his life, for his life. The battle bound him in fear, darkness, disability as death’s shadow loomed, and living a “medicalized” life controlled him. His prayers were desperate; fervent. The scariest time of day was as the daylight left, and darkness was inside him, and all around him. One day, at that very time, he opened a letter from a girl we had grown up with. It contained the refrain: “We had it all, didn’t we?” Growing up, we had pick-up ball games, woods to play army in, the best dogs in the world; we had it all, didn’t we? We had cold lemonade in the summer, and hot chocolate on snow days; cherry smashes at the soda fountain and every watching out for everyone else; we had it all.”

He began to weep as he read. How God has loved me all my life, he finally understood. And it continues even in this, he realized, through simply gestures, genuine letters in the mail, and in all sorts of ways. I do have it all, even now, he knew. “I am beloved of God – those words washed over me like the waters of baptism,” he said.

This reality of love begins the “story” we must place our lives in, that we must repeat and cherish and listen over and over again as new challenges and opportunities of

this adventure called our life together are these of Jesus Christ. Our invitation to live out of God's love, to have that known within us and through us, and so to take on surrendering ourselves over and over before this sacred altar to allow Christ to live in us for all others to see.

So we see ourselves, and others, so differently than the world would have us. Paul says it as well as anyone ever could:

From now on, regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God...

So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. (2nd Cor., 5:16ff)

So we – SJTL - are ambassadors for Christ.

We are asked to acknowledge that we are a community together.

We are asked to genuinely regard one another as a Child of God.

We together are bringing our gifts to bear in the way the community needs them, with love and humility, when the time, the occasion comes for our gifts to be deployed. We are to show this with gentleness and compassion; with genuine prayer for one another's well being; with a willingness to think the best of one another.

Thanks be to God! Indeed, let us bow down before him and then offer God's peace to one another.