

The Rev. Steve Best
St. Thomas Church
1.12.20; Epiphany 1A
Is. 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43;
Matt. 3:13-17

Receive a Blessing, Be a Blessing

If Jesus was without sin, he would have no need for repentance. This may explain why his cousin John the Baptist was surprised to meet Jesus at the river's edge--where so many sinful men and women, some notoriously so, had been gathering for weeks to be cleansed and healed. Despite John's success as a prophet, and his considerable following, he knew in his heart of hearts that he was unworthy to baptize Jesus, "Dear Lord, I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matt. 3:14).

Jesus' response only adds more mystery to what is about to happen in the murky waters of the river Jordan—and murky is the right word to describe the color of this magnificent river revered by both Christians and Jews that meanders from north to south through the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. Jesus replies that his baptism should be done because "it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15).

I can't think of another religious word that evokes more consternation than the word, "righteousness." The history of our Christian faith is full of deeply troubling examples of when the self-righteous have gained power in the Church and attempted to zealously cleanse it from all who are deemed "unrighteous" and not worthy to belong. It is so important for us to see that John the Baptist rejects this kind of self-righteousness and, instead, embraces the path of servant leadership and humility.

There are many prophetic voices found in the Hebrew Scriptures but the one we are asked to consider today is the voice of the Prophet Isaiah. This mighty prophet is challenging the people of Israel to live into the collective call to be a beloved servant of the Lord, bringing forth justice to the nations but to do so non-violently: "a bruised reed he will not break" and "a dimly burning wick he will not quench." (Is. 42:3).

Early Christians came to understand this prophesy to apply to the arrival of the Messiah, Jesus, whose righteousness manifests as a full, complete, and perfect relationship with God the Father, and the Holy Spirit. Today's gospel is one of the

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best illustrations of the beauty and the majesty of the Holy Trinity at work. In this beautiful moment Jesus has a grand epiphany: He is not, will not, and never will be alone in his mission of bringing love into the world. Jesus' baptism seals the deal and reveals the power of community at work. Jesus never traveled alone. We never travel alone, and we have a constant source of spiritual energy that supplies us when we meet obstacles to our mission of spreading healing, hope, and love in this world.

Last Sunday, Father Lex, spoke to the issue of how we hope for change and yet resist it at the same time. Renewal of our baptisms on a regular basis is the medicine for this condition. Because of Jesus being fully human as well as fully divine, he demonstrates in this Gospel story the power that is released when a human being is anointed with blessings from above. This anointing grounds us in our true selves and empowers us to continue to be active participants in God's mission even when we hit resistance from within or outside of ourselves.

In the very next chapter in Matthew, we know that Jesus will face all sorts of temptations by Satan as he begins his public ministry. His identity as the Son of God and the one who is to bring salvation into the world will be challenged by the rich and the poor, the well and the infirm, believers and unbelievers. In this powerful moment at his baptism Jesus receives his true and lasting identity as "the beloved with whom God is well pleased." (Matt. 3:17).

In this season of Epiphany, we too, seek our own mission knowing that if we truly are responding to God's call to serve those most in need, we will need to be willing to go wherever God wants us to go as we jump into the murky, muddy waters that comprise our own version of the river Jordan. In our climate we are never far from potholes, muddied pools, leaky roofs, and threatened foundations that support our homes. We may have gotten over some of the irritation about getting wet—it's just a fact of life here—but we have not gotten use to getting muddy.

My first encounter with running away from muddy water was on a soccer field at Woodridge Elementary here in Bellevue. The field, at that time, was so badly constructed that after a rainfall, which was often, the field was known to form a large lake at about the midpoint line. Not wanting to get wet, muddied, and cold we would sometimes apprehensively stand around on the edge of this pool rather than dive into it and retrieve the ball that was usually floating in the middle of it.

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So, one day, coach Bill Bunselmeyer got wise. Before the game, he started running our entire team up and down the field until finally we—every player—were entirely wet and caked with mud. It worked. At game time and the sound of the whistle, we all ran straight into whatever puddle, pool, or lake that was on the field and were then the first to retrieve the ball and make the play. I can still hear his thundering voice, that to an 8-year-old boy was the voice of God, saying, “Follow through! Follow through!”

God asks all of us to jump into the murky, sometimes muddy, places in our lives: workplaces that allow discrimination, a best friend who drinks too much, a family member who is mistreating a spouse, a culture that prefers the accumulation of expensive toys over giving shelter to the homeless. Wherever you are in your spiritual journeys, jump in with us here at St. Thomas, and follow through with the promises you have made (or desire to make) to God, the Body of Christ, and to those you love. It is often when we enter the hurting lives of people that the sky does open up and we can best see how beautifully the Spirit of God descends upon us.

In the words of the last verse of the hymn we sung at the Gospel today, “Teach me to love you as your angels love, one holy passion filling all my frame; The baptism of the heaven-descended dove, my heart an altar, and your love the flame.” These words are even more powerful when you realize that it was written by George Croly an Anglican priest of the 19th century who chose to serve for 25 years in the hardened, darkened, sooty slums of London bringing hope to a people whose lights had literally gone out and all blessings had gone away.

On that special day in the Jordan river, the Holy Spirit landed on Jesus and lit him up with love. This, too, is our responsibility as we consider who in our lives needs to be not only reminded of God’s love but also need to receive God’s blessing. And we need to not be afraid to bless people publicly—for all to see—just as Jesus was blessed and baptized for all to see.

In a groundbreaking book written by pastoral counselors Gary Smalley and John Trent, they outline the practical steps we can take in our relationships and in our communities that convey the kind of unconditional love and validation that form the heart of God’s blessing.

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Firstly, we can offer the blessing of touch that conveys, concern, affection, and encouragement. It is likely that John the Baptist touched Jesus with his hands and arms as he lowered Jesus into the waters of the Jordan and, afterwards, when he raised Jesus back up. Touch is an integral part of all sacraments of the church and in our daily lives. I will never forget when my physician put his gentle hand on my shoulder after delivering news of a painful treatment procedure that would soon follow.

Secondly, we can offer the blessing of well-chosen and well-timed words that express admiration, gratitude, and appreciation. When the heavens opened and God said, “This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” these words brought great validation and strength to Jesus and his followers.

Thirdly, we can offer the blessing of conveying high value to others by offering quality time, going out of our comfort zone to support them in practical and all other ways. We bless others when we show them that they matter.

Fourthly, we can convey a blessing upon another by envisioning and expressing a future—God’s holy future—for others that is full of hope, growth, success, and joy. We point out their God-given gifts, and desires and celebrate them. Jesus’ future, though it included pain and sorrow—was ultimately one that brought abundant healing and salvation into the world.

And lastly, we bless people when we make an active commitment to not only see their gifts, envision a bright future for them, but show our willingness to make sacrifices to help them fulfill God’s mission in this world. This is the goodness glue that helps all the components of a true and lasting blessing hang together.

In our baptismal covenant, we all make promises to God and each other to go the extra mile for people—the righteous and the unrighteous. In short, to follow through so that we might receive a blessing and be a blessing until all are baptized with love. Amen.