

January 24, 2021 – Third Sunday After the Epiphany

The Pastor's Reflection

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. is posted here in written form and also in audio form as part of a devotional service at www.firstcommunitychurch.com.

Scripture Readings: Acts 1:1-8
Mark 1:4-11

In response to last week's reflection, one of you asked me to say more about my assertion that Jesus made a mistake, realized he made a mistake, corrected his mistake, and grew spiritually in the process. What I said was apparently not congruent with the person's understanding of Jesus as divine, as God. The scripture passage, Matthew 15:21-28, that was the basis of my reflection is as follows:

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

First, let me say that I love it when you read my reflections and read them carefully enough to raise questions about them. There is plenty of room for questioning, for doubt in this church! One of the sayings we have in this church is that when you come here, you don't need to check your mind at the door. (We don't have a policy on it, but I would personally prefer that you do check your guns at the door, especially assault weapons. I know you have 2nd Amendment rights, but I would appreciate it if you would give them to the Greeter to leave in the narthex before entering the sanctuary. But this isn't the point.) The point is that when we listen to each other and engage in respectful dialogue about religion and/or spirituality, it makes it possible for both of us to grow in the faith.

My reflection on this particular passage, which I chose as the basis of my remarks celebrating the life of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., highlighted the disdain that the Israelites of Jesus' day felt toward the Canaanites, a disdain that Jesus apparently internalized. In this passage of scripture, it is clear that Jesus, *at least at first*, refuses even to speak to the Canaanite woman, let alone heal her daughter, who was tormented by a demon. I don't think there is any other way of understanding his comment regarding his disinclination to throw "the children's food to the dogs" than that the Israelites are the children of God and the Canaanites are dogs.

When the mother of this tormented child does not argue with Jesus about his prejudice, his dichotomization of the Israelites and the Canaanites, but implores him simply to care about the dogs as well as the children, at least just a little, I think Jesus got "woke." He tells her that it is because of her great faith that he will heal her daughter. I demur. I think his act of healing is not in response to the woman's great faith; it is more attributable to the fact that, through his encounter with the woman, Jesus felt ashamed of his response, came to his senses, realized that his call was bigger than a ministry

solely to the people of Israel, and responded out of that larger vision. I see no evidence of Jesus being touched with compassion for either the woman or her daughter, at least up to that point in the encounter. Even at the end, I believe the healing was more about him than about the woman and her daughter.

I know I am treading on dangerous ground—criticizing Jesus. Some people would call this “cheeky.” In my defense, the early Christian councils affirmed Jesus’ humanity. The Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) issued the Chalcedonian Definition, which repudiated the notion of a single nature in Christ; it declared that he has two natures, divine and human, in one person. It also insisted on the completeness of his two natures. Jesus Christ was “very God and very human.” This understanding of Jesus’ nature was also affirmed in the Athanasian Creed and the Nicene Creed.

If Jesus was truly human, just like us, he could make mistakes. He could lose his temper. He could grow, even in his relationship to God. He could be hungry and thirsty. He could need the presence of people who care enough, who love him enough to stay with him in his time of trial. It means that he actually suffered on the cross. It is in this context that I suggest that Jesus gradually come to realize his true nature. He came to realize that he was not only human; he was also an incarnation of God. He gradually come to realize and internalize his calling. This process, according to scripture, began with his baptism and was immediately followed by his temptations in the wilderness, temptations to do something different with his life than what God wanted him to do. This theme is movingly played out in Nikos Kazantzakis’ novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

But, you might respond, wasn’t Jesus special right from the very beginning? Isn’t that what the Christmas story with the star, the angels, the shepherds, the wise men, and the miracle of the Virgin Birth all about? I agree. Jesus was special from the very beginning, but there was a time in his life, a moment when he realized he was special. This realization, this epiphany was followed by a conscious decision to follow the path to which he was called by God, even when it led to suffering and death. The story of his spiritual evolution, which began with the birth, was not over with the baptism. It was something that he lived out throughout his life. As Thich Nhat Hanh has said, “Our own life is the instrument with which we experiment with truth.” I think this was true of Jesus as well as us.

There is a parallel between Jesus and the life and the growing spirituality of Siddhartha Gautama. When did Siddhartha become the Buddha? Legend has it that his birth was miraculous; he was born out of his mother’s side at the level of the heart chakra. This would be symbolic of a life and a teaching that was grounded in love. However, Siddhartha, after approximately fifteen years living as an ascetic, sat under what came to be known as the bodhi tree, vowing not to rise until he became enlightened and found the way to release humanity from suffering. Forty-nine days later, as the morning star arose, he experienced enlightenment. He spent the rest of his long life walking back and forth along the Ganges, teaching people, helping people. So, when did he actually become the Buddha?

I would suggest that what was true of Jesus and the Buddha is true of us as well. Was Jesus the only person in history to be both human and divine? Or are all of us both human and divine? To be sure, Jesus was special from the moment of his birth; but we are, too. Jesus came to understand, embrace, and commit himself to the spiritual discipline of the Way as an adult, just as we need to do. With Jesus, this epiphany took place following his baptism. Like Jesus, as evidenced in the passage from Matthew 15, we often discover that we are living in too small a world, a world defined by a tribal identity or a caste, a world that does not embrace people who are different from us as children of God. This is what it means to get “woke.”

Epiphany, January 6, was originally set aside by the Church to commemorate the visit of the Magi to the Manger. This religious celebration was later expanded to include Jesus' first recorded miracle: the changing of water to wine at the wedding he attended in Cana. It was later expanded to include a celebration of Jesus' baptism by his cousin, John, in the River Jordan.

Today I would like us to think about the third aspect of the celebration of Epiphany—the event of Jesus' baptism. First, let me say a few words about baptism, about infant baptism and adult or believer baptism, about the role of the Sacrament of Baptism in our spiritual journey, and about the role of the church in this spiritual process. Let me start with the last point, the role of the church in our spiritual formation and our spiritual journey.

When I began theological school, we were required to serve a minimum of one year in a field education placement, usually as a Minister to Youth under the supervision of the church's pastor. At the beginning of the year, our theological school scheduled times when we could be interviewed by search committees from several churches, giving the churches the opportunity to see if we were what they wanted, and helping us to decide if this was what we were looking for in a field education placement.

I initially intended to skip the interviews because I had already been offered a position at a church in Northampton, a church that I sometimes attended while I was a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Massachusetts.

I liked the Northampton church very much. It had a beautiful modern sanctuary. The pastor was appreciative of my gifts and supportive of my decision to enter the ministry. To be perfectly honest, the proximity of the church to Smith College was also a draw. The Smith College girls were pretty, wicked smart, and their parents were filthy rich. I thought that if God wanted me to marry one of them, I would just have to go along with God's plan. The pastor wanted me to offer study groups to the Smith students in the hope that they might affiliate with our church. Plus, I really liked Northampton; it was a funky little college town.

When the day came, for some unknown reason (or a reason known only to God), I decided to sign up for several other interviews. The first two did not spark my interest or imagination. Then I met with the search committee from the Pawtucket Congregational Church in Lowell. The people were old, maybe even older than God. The pastor spoke with a Welsh accent and his false teeth kept slipping. I knew little about Lowell except that it was a depressed old mill town with strong ethnic neighborhoods. I basically thought of it as the armpit of the Merrimack Valley.

By the end of the interview, I knew that I had to accept their invitation. Since my decision made absolutely no sense, I decided it must be a call. I also knew I had to stay in that church with that pastor not for the required one year, but for the entire three years of my theological education. I have never regretted that choice. My experience in that struggling little church in a poor section of a run-down city was an integral part of my preparation for ministry. The Reverend William Rees became a role model and a mentor. And in Lowell I met my future wife, to whom I have been married for fifty-three years. So, I guess I did pretty well--or maybe God did a good job placing me there. I have to give God at least some of the credit!

In those days I was a young card-carrying liberal--socially, politically, and theologically. I am still a liberal, though I am not as young as I once was; I am at least a third of the way through life and my hair and beard are beginning to turn grey. But I still remember a conversation I had with Reverend Rees over fifty years ago.

I was outspokenly critical of the Christian church. I believed that it was more focused on the acquisition of power and money than on being a servant church; that it measured its worth by numbers, by secular standards of success; and that it was not

true to its calling to preach and incarnate the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I pointed out that the church had caused a lot of wars throughout history, and that religious wars, inquisitions, crusades, and persecutions must break Jesus' heart.

Reverend Rees told me he agreed with everything I said. He said I was bringing a clear standard to bear on the church, a standard against which the church should be measured and judged. Then he asked me where I got this standard, this understanding of what it meant to be a Christian, and my vision of what the church should be and could be.

I was stunned. I had to admit that I had been taught this standard, that I had internalized or developed this standard from the church. The church had given me everything I needed to judge not only my own individual life, but also the church, to shine a light on our individual and collective brokenness and to offer us resources for healing and growth. In that moment I realized that for all its limitations, all its inadequacies, all its sin, the church must be an important part of God's plan, and I would have to spend the rest of my life in the church—shaping it and being shaped by it.

The Protestant Church recognizes two sacraments: Holy Communion and Baptism. They are sacraments of the church. They do not make sense without the church or outside the church. It would be strange for someone to ask if they could receive the sacraments of the church but not want anything at all to do with the church--not be a member of a church, not attend the worship services of a gathered church, and not support the ministry of the church in any way. Yet this is just what many people do.

Through the Sacrament of Infant Baptism, the parents place their child within a community of faith. They ask that community to help build the foundation that will enable their child to make an informed decision about religion when he/she comes of age. The parents promise not only to bring their child to church, but also to be involved in the church themselves. Children learn from example as well as precept. If the parents do not think church is important enough to make the effort to attend, the child will come to the same conclusion. And if the parents and the child do not become a part of the church, their spiritual life will not be shaped and deepened by the teachings and ministry of this special community of faith.

When a child is brought before the church to be baptized, it is obvious that the child did not decide to be baptized. The child's parents made the decision. The parents want to provide the child with a religious education within the context of the Christian church. When the child reaches the age of reason, he/she will decide either to confirm that baptism or not.

At that time, usually during high school, the child may decide that religion is "an opiate of the masses" as Karl Marx believed, or "a neurotic adjustment to life" as Sigmund Freud believed. The child may decide that there is nothing of value in religion. Some people come to this conclusion. They think that Jesus and Buddha didn't know what they were talking about, that people like Francis of Assisi, Albert Schweitzer, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King, Jr. were deluded. They become religious dropouts.

However, many young people decide to confirm their baptism. They participate in a confirmation class, which is traditionally taught by the pastor. When they join with the church at the end of the year, they become a member of that church and the denomination within which that church stands. If they later move to another community or decide to attend a different church, they will simply reaffirm their faith in a ceremony welcoming them as a new member and their membership will be transferred from their home church to their new church. They will not be re-baptized.

Since a sacrament is something that Jesus did and that he told us to do, we need to think about Jesus' baptism. Jesus was not baptized as an infant. His parents did not

make the decision to have him baptized; he made this decision himself. Jesus was baptized when he was an adult. He was baptized at the beginning of his ministry. In fact, this is where Mark begins his gospel.

Jesus didn't invent baptism, and neither did John the Baptist. Ancient Judaism observed a ritual washing that was tied to the rites of purification. A ritual of immersion was practiced in ancient mystery religions. The catechumenate would enter into a river or pool of water and then reemerge. This symbolized rebirth, going back into the waters from which we came, and then being born into a new life.

This is why many of the references to baptism in the Bible describe it as a kind of death. In baptism we die to our old life and are born into something new. We Christians believe that death itself is a kind of rebirth. Just as we entered into a new realm through the event of our birth, so, also, we will enter into a new realm, a new life, a new world on the other side of death. And, we need to remember, there are different kinds of deaths.

So why did Jesus ask to be baptized? It was probably not to wash away original sin or his own personal sin. It had nothing to do with saving his soul, as in the stupid belief that people who are not baptized go to limbo or hell. It was not even, as it is in our church, a rite of entry into the Christian community, for the Christian community did not exist at the time of Jesus' baptism.

I think the explanation of why Jesus was baptized lies in a quote by the early church father and theologian Tertullian, who lived in the second century after Jesus' birth. Tertullian tells us, "Christians are made, not born." What does Tertullian mean when he says, "Christians are made, not born?"

Jesus' baptism involved a decision. There is no doubt that Jesus was special from the time of his birth; the nativity stories and legends attest to that. However, there came a time in his life when Jesus had to decide. He had to make a conscious decision to walk the path to which God called him. He had to walk away from the kind of life that most men of his time were living to become an itinerant preacher and healer. He had to enter the wilderness. From that point on, his life was centered in his relationship with God.

Some people are born into their religion, while other religions demand a conscious choice. For example, what makes a person a Jew? You are automatically a Jew if your mother is even partially a Jew. This is all you need to be a Jew. You don't need to hold a certain set of beliefs or go to synagogue, even on the High Holy Days.

In contrast to this understanding of what it means to be a member of a religion, Tertullian tells us we are not Christians because one or both of our parents were Christians. We are also not Christians because our parents decided to have us baptized or dedicated when we were infants. There is nothing automatic about being a Christian. Christian discipleship requires a decision. It requires a commitment. At some point in our life, just like Jesus, we have to make a conscious choice. We need to confirm our infant baptism or dedication and reaffirm our faith within the context of the church or some other spiritual path.

The Book of Acts describes how the early church understood the Holy Spirit. Just before his ascension into heaven following his death and resurrection, Jesus tells his disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes to them. This implies that the Holy Spirit is a kind of spiritual energy. On the day of Pentecost, which was like another epiphany, the disciples were filled with or energized by the Holy Spirit, and their lives were never the same.

The baptism of Jesus leads us to think about what it would mean for us to be baptized by the Holy Spirit, to die to our old self and be born anew in God. What are the decisions we need to make to turn our life around? What is the equivalent in our life of

Jesus' commitment to live the life to which he was called? How do we experience the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives? And how can we experience and share these transforming gifts if we have nothing to do with the church or some other community of faith?

We have a calling as disciples, but the church has a calling as well. The church is called to offer the teachings of Jesus, powerful resources for living, to our generation just as it has for generations past and as it will for generations to come. It is not called to entertain us, to make us feel comfortable, to make us feel warm and fuzzy inside. It is called to help us experience the kingdom of God, to deepen our relationship with God through Christ. It calls us to become seekers; it calls us to a difficult and demanding spiritual journey as individuals and as a community of faith. It charges us to bring about the kingdom of God on earth.

Some of us are seekers. Not all of us, but some of us. A Buddhist would say that we are seeking that which we already have: the divine Buddha nature that is implanted deep within us. We can never be separated from our Buddha nature, but we can be separated from our consciousness of it. A Christian would say the same thing: we were special, divine as well as human, from the moment of our birth, but not everyone lives in such a way that it shows that he/she knows this.

I think it is strange to baptize an infant, especially in light of the symbolism of death and rebirth that is a central part of the ritual of baptism. Other than placing the child within a community of faith that will provide the child with the resources needed to make an adult decision to become a follower of the Way, which I do think is important, there is nothing that the child needs from us, from the church. The infant is already closer to God, to the kingdom of heaven, than we are. As Wordsworth put it in his poem, *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, we come into this world "trailing clouds of glory." This experience of dwelling in the kingdom of heaven begins to fade as we are socialized, as we become caught up in the demands of everyday life. It is because we have become separated from that which we had as infants, that we need to begin the search. As Walter Percy has put it, *The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.*

Some of us, from time to time, have an epiphany; we get a momentary glimpse of that heavenly realm from which we came, which we carry with us and within us throughout our life, and to which we will return after we die. Jesus got a glimpse of this at the time of his baptism when, as we read, *And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* (Mark 1:10-11)

This can happen to us as well. As Peter Matthiessen, who wrote *The Search for the Snow Leopard*, one of my favorite books, has put it, *Soon the child's clear eye is clouded over by ideas and opinions, preconceptions and abstractions. Simple free being becomes encrusted with the burdensome armor of the ego. Not until years later does an instinct come that a vital sense of mystery has been withdrawn. The sun glints through the pines, and the heart is pierced in a moment of beauty and strange pain, like a memory of paradise. After that day, we become seekers.*

This was the experience that Jesus had at the time of his baptism, that Siddhartha had under the bodhi tree. If you, like Jesus, like the Buddha, are a seeker in these dark days, remember: Don't let the light go out.