January 8, 2017 All Saints’

Baptism of our Lord Year A

Isaiah 42:1-9 Acts 10:34-43

Psalm 29 Matthew 3:13-17

Let us pray: We thank you Lord, that you have kindled in us the light of Epiphany. Amen

When my daughters are home, we like to watch reruns for Law and Order. Our favorites are the ones with Detective Lenny Brisco and Prosecutor Jack McCoy.

We were watching one of these reruns, and Cahaley turned to me and said, “Boy, after watching all the commercials, I feel fat, lazy, ugly and dumb. It’s not even that I feel these things, I am these things. These commercials are really terrible. Maybe I am just more sensitive now that I don’t watch TV anymore. Whatever! These commercials are really getting to me.”

Psychologists call this “mirroring.” Society, through lots of different ploys, hold up mirrors and often we accept the reflection they are working very diligently to display. Since we are such relational beings, we are affected by our environment. We are susceptible. TV commercials are designed to make you feel inadequate so that you will buy whatever is being sold to enhance the image that you have (often unconsciously) accepted.

The lesson here is to know your mirrors as a way to know yourself. Not always easy.

There are bad mirrors: I think this is one of the main reasons parents are worried by the company their kids keep, or why peer pressure is so effective, or why fashion can dictate clothing trends, or why propaganda can become real news. We lose ourselves in false images parading as truth; and in that reflection we are no longer able to find our own internal center.

There are good mirrors as well. Positive reinforcement is very encouraging. Teachers who believe in second chances can change lives. Listening instills trust. A friend who goes the extra mile makes you feel special. We find ourselves in images of love, gazing upon us; and in that reflection we are able to center ourselves in our own dignity and worth.

In Christianity we have a beautiful mirror. It’s Baptism. We know ourselves in the reflection of Baptism: Of God’s love for us as God’s beloved sons and daughters.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Jesus is walking from the Galilee. I am assuming he’s going a long distance because he wants to see this thing that John is doing in the desert. He comes to John, who is baptizing in the Jordan, who is demanding people to rebuke their sins and to repent. And people feel the need. They are there in droves. Yet, why is Jesus there? Jesus is sinless. Why is he going to be baptized? John is worried as well. “I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?” This makes no sense.

I think we can ask the same question, when we baptize a baby. What sin has a child committed that needs to be forgiven? We’ve been told in the past, that we are washing away original sin, a terrible sin that all are born with. And in fact, if we don’t get baptized, bad things can happen: like babies ending up in limbo. I remember worrying about my kindergarten friends (the ones who were not graduating to parochial school with me) who I thought were going to hell because they hadn’t been baptized yet.

In other words, Original Sin is a bad thing and we must rid ourselves of this evil, to start afresh.

At the risk of sounding like a heretic, I think believing in original sin is a false mirror. This is not how God thinks of us. We are born as children of God. God has created you as you are. God cherishes you. God longs for your companionship. God has plans for a relationship with you that will last forever, a love affair that will only grow in its intimacy with you. God can’t get enough of you. In fact, you make God’s day. You are the apple of God’s eye. God’s love for you knows no end.

If we think of God like this, we will find ourselves in images of love, God gazing upon us; and in that reflection we are able to center ourselves in our own dignity and worth and to love others.

This is a good mirror. Jesus is coming to be baptized under God’s loving gaze, as God’s well beloved son.

He is not coming to rid himself of sin. He does not imagine himself as sinful, not worthy, less than, not up to snuff, ugly, dumb, or lazy.

But here is the new idea: Neither are we. Jesus does not want us to come to baptism with a burden of shame and unworthiness. This is a bad mirror.

Not to say that there isn’t sin in the world. Plenty of it. We don’t have to look too far to know that is true. And not to say that there isn’t a need for repentance in the world. There is a reason there are so many at Jordan River, being baptized by John.

But it’s not because they were sin or that you are sin. This is a bad mirror. It’s because they found, deep within their own center, the glory of God’s love for them, beating as their very own heart, and they wanted to reflect that love, and not the death blows of poverty, violence, murder, heinous acts of cruelty, or ignorance. To repent means to “turn away” from the death blows and to face life and love, over and over again.

Jesus was drawn to baptism, and asked to be baptized; he desired to be baptized because he was accepting that in a sinful world, his stance was going to be repentance as a way to be open to God’s will. His stance was going to be surrender. His stance was going to be a willingness to die for his friends.

Jesus did not protect himself from the sin of the world by his own virtue.  And neither should we.

We will never eradicate sin in the world because there is freedom.  There will always be the freedom to act in evil ways. Yet without this freedom, there can't be faith, because to have faith, there must come be a choice to live in the good, which is only possible if the knowledge of good and evil exist. That’s the way of Adam and Eve. That’s the way of our humanity.

And yet, we are blessed, because under the mirror of God’s loving glance, we are able to choose for a faith; a faith we will want to deepen our whole lives. We are invited to walk into the baptismal waters with Jesus.

When we celebrate our baptism, we are not celebrating the "washing away of our personal original sin.”

Rather, we are celebrating, even in a world with the capacity for so much evil, God’s life giving spirit. We are able to mirror this spirit as the power to love, to forgive, to be filled with mercy. We love because God loved us first.

That's why Bishop Rob tells us that we want to splash water always, everywhere.

We must remember that in the opening words of Genesis we were told at our creation that we are very, very good. And just as the Spirit of God brooded over the waters of creation, God broods, like a dove, over our creation. And it is in this goodness, we are able, with God’s help, to reflect the power of our baptism.

As we come out of the waters of our own faith, the heavens are opened up, and the Spirit of God descends, and a voice from heaven tells us, “You are my Beloved with whom I am well pleased.”

Amen

(the Rev.) Jamie L. Hamilton

1. “All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of God as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” (2 Corinthians 3:18) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)