

Baptism and the Cross

Baptism has been front and center for three weeks now, starting with the baptism of Jesus, and last week celebrating the baptisms of Jane and Marcus....today wrapping it all up with the baptism of a youngster quite dear to me, my grandson, Evan.

We know that baptism is the doorway into a new life, but it is not the house itself,... it is the beginning of God's Holy Spirit coming to make her home in you, but it is not yet the full expression of that new life, it is the creation of a new community, but it is not yet that community in its completeness.

Our readings today drill down even deeper into the meaning of baptism.

They begin with Jesus calling his first four followers, the four who will become his closest friends, his dearest confidants, his most heartbreaking deserters and deniers, yet who will one day be transformed into fearless witnesses to the new thing God is doing in the world.

He calls them and in that calling, families are changed forever....

Old Zebedee scratching his chin as he watches his adult sons leave the family business forever....

Wives and children wondering what's next for them as dads leave home...

As lives are turned around....

".....because the kingdom of heaven doesn't exist to serve the family, the family exists to serve the kingdom ... because the goal of the kingdom isn't to make us better at our jobs, but to help us see that our work matters only when it lines up with the will of this merciful, compassionate, God..." Long, Matthew, 43, paraphrased.

Those lives being turned upside down are on full display in Corinth, where, as we see in Paul's letter today, baptism doesn't cure what ails us, it's not a magic pill.....as the new community of newly baptized Christians is nearing civil war.

Alliances and alliances are formed,helping us to see how easy it is for us to turn the church into a club, to exchange **following** Jesus for simply admiring Jesus.

Many folks look at conflict within the church, and in the broader society, and run.

For many, conflict is a bad thing; but for we Christians, what we come to slowly discover as we grow into this community, is that conflict is not only inevitable, it is necessary to our transformation.

"What the heck is he talking about," you may be wondering????

"Isn't the Christian life one of peace and harmony, sister and brotherhood?????"

Well, yes and no.

"Yes" in the sense that that is the ultimate goal, that is the kingdom, that is the place we will one day be, by the grace of God.

But "No" in the sense that we don't get to that goal, we don't get to the kingdom, we can't recognize the face of God, without being thoroughly and completely and forever changed from the inside out.

"Unless you become like a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of God...", Jesus says..., which means we must somehow return to a state of innocence, but not by ignoring the things that have destroyed our innocence, but by confronting them, facing them, and only then, finally, transforming them.

We cannot change without conflict: conflict with our egos, our lovers and our enemies.

Here's why...

Jesus comes to take away the sin of the world.

We say that every week.

We believe it, but often don't really know what we mean by these words.

For some, sin is a crime that has to be punished, so Jesus takes our punishment in our place and we are made right with God.

But what if sin isn't a crime that Jesus pays the price for, what if sin is a sickness, a sickness that Jesus heals, through his willingness to love us to death, to death on the cross?

The people of the Pacific islands have a method for dealing with community conflict.

Perhaps because they live on small islands, it's necessary for survival.

Perhaps it developed because God's Word is scattered all over the world, so that missionaries weren't needed to bring it, only to discover it already there.

In Hawaii it's called ho`oponopono.

In Chuukese, it's called omusomus.

In Tongan it's oni kotoa ki heni.

You know how it works.

Everyone gathers.

Hurts are expressed, angers shared, feelings vented, accusations made, defenses rise, excuses get made...but eventually, as folks keep at it, excuses are let go, defenses come down, people begin the often excruciating task of looking at themselves, egos are deflated, and after a very long time, healing begins, because everyone taking part is willing to hang on the cross for a time, to suffer for the sake of the community, to die so that new life can begin again.

What my experience with ho`oponopono has taught me is that perhaps the roots of our conflicts are not found in anger or jealousy or greed, but the real roots of conflict grow out of hurt and woundedness and pain.

We all know people who were not provided proper love as children, and how often such people grow up to be braggarts or loudmouths or bullies....but the root of those behaviors is insecurity, the fear of not being worthy, a hatred of self.

And yet, when we summon the courage to face ourselves, when we do the hard work of reconciliation with one another, we are given a peace that passes all understanding...

The other day, our new president was inaugurated.

He takes the top job in a nation that is deeply divided, urban and rural, white and non-white, rich and poor, and on it goes.

His campaign was focused on expressing the grievances of a substantial minority of voters, enough to win the electoral college, but not the popular vote.

His time leading up to taking the oath of office was marked by tweets attacking those who criticize him, including folks like the actress Meryl Streep and the outgoing head of the CIA.

And one can only wonder at the woundedness, the insecurity, the hurt, that sloshes around, unacknowledged, by this our new president.

So, where do we stand and what shall we do?

Paul tells us....

In the midst of all human conflict, there stands the cross.

As my best thinking bumps up against yours, its not power or money that saves us, it is the cross: which says that the only real way to life is through death; meaning the death of my ego, the death to "my way or the highway" ways of thinking and interacting with others, meaning the death that comes with gathering the courage to examine childhood abuse or neglect or abandonment....

And as we enter into these new and challenging political times, it may mean killing off our comfortable assumptions that assaults on civil liberties and social justice, assaults on those who are different, don't happen, or if they do, don't involve me.

Taking up the cross, living faithfully the baptized life, it means praying for our enemies, engaging in constant self-examination, refusing to return hate for hate or force with force, but trusting in the foolish wisdom of God....a wisdom that requires turning the other cheek, walking the second mile, giving both coat and shirt...

As one fellow puts it: Let the person be found who has undergone the shattering experience of forgiving, truly and tenderly, some awful wrong to himself, still more some terrible wrong done to one he loves, and he will understand the meaning of the cross better than all the theologians in the world." Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, 193 paraphrased.

This is the life that young Evan now enters.

This is your life, as baptized people.

May you find that "the cross enlarges your soul until it mourns and rejoices at the same time.....until your soul feels the world's pain — and hopes for the world's healing — in a single heartbeat." Id. 63, paraphrased.

+amen

