

You Are My Son

Epiphany C, 1/12/2025

“Nothing’s more difficult,” an old saying goes, “Than doing things simply.” I think it was Yogi Berra who said it, or wrote it, though it could’ve been another of our go-tos for *bon mots*, Will Rogers or H.L. Mencken, maybe Mark Twain, or for fans of American football, John Madden. He’s the source, if memory serves, of the undeniable insights that, “No matter what game you’re playing, you gotta get points on the board. The team that gets the most points tends to win,” and, “In playing football, it’s important to be able to see.” In refereeing, too, as many a fan and coach has called out on the field or at the television when one of the zebra-stripes misses an obvious instance of pass interference, or invents with their mind’s eye a holding call that no-one else can see.

But back to doing things simply and making it look easy: that takes skill, practice, and patience. Wait for the opportune moment to drop a key point, suggestion, or insight. Set the move up carefully, don’t tell anyone it’s coming, but make it so that once it gets here, they’ll realize they should’ve seen it coming all along. The principle applies in negotiations, in chess and other games that help us get through the game of life, in politics, and in writing. ‘Wait for the opportune moment’, as Jack Sparrow famously said. ‘Float like a butterfly; sting like a bee’, as Muhammad Ali even more famously said. It’s also well if you, unlike many a bee, know how to survive the sting.

For ‘doing things simply’ I maybe should’ve said ‘writing things simply’, because that’s what I’m on about. Why? It’s because of how Luke slips, quietly and

delicately, Jesus's baptism into today's gospel passage. Simple, right? The passage comes from Luke, chapter 3, after Mary and Joseph and Jesus and the manger, and the shepherds and the wilderness, and the trip to the temple when Jesus was 12. It begins by noting at length what John has to say to those he's exhorting to be baptized, and how he chose to say it. These aren't the simple bits, though; Matthew, too, puts Jesus's baptism in his third chapter, after his birth narrative and other preliminaries. But Matthew adds a whole back-and-forth between John and Jesus about why is Jesus doing this anyhow, it's not like he's a sinner, and how unworthy John is to baptize him even if he had've been. None of that here in Luke. We have John's messages: repent now and avoid apocalyptic doom; soldiers and everybody, be content with your wages and stop stealing; and Herod, if you and your family and regime could just quietly go away, that'd be great. Oh, he adds, I'm not worthy to untie the Messiah's sandals, but doesn't know that those sandals right there in front of him, with the Messiah in them. After saying how "The winnowing fork is already in his hand," John ends with, "...the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." After an aside about Herod's persecution that the RCL leaves out [Why? Good question. -ed.], we get this: "Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus had also been baptized and was praying...". See what I mean? Sting like a bee. Luke just slipped it in there about Jesus getting baptized same as everyone else. He'd been there the whole time, heard the whole speech, heard about baptizing with the Spirit and with fire, the winnowing fork and the fire none could put out – and here we pause to extend our deepest sympathies to those who have lost their homes and more to the wildfires raging in California, and to those who will – and said...nothing. Jesus just queued with the rest of them going down in the river to pray. So simple, so simply done.

Written, I mean. Written. So simply written. Why? Again, the answer isn't, 'That must've been the way it happened.' We have no way to verify that, and the other gospels that speak of this event speak of it differently from this, and from one another. Not all that differently, to be sure, but in these things small differences – simple differences – can make all the difference.

So what difference does this scene make? Well, remember that way back in chapter one, John knew who Jesus was while they were both still in their mothers' wombs. When Elizabeth saw Mary coming to her home, she said the babe inside leapt for joy. Jesus – and we all miss this – *in utero* did not. He was much less developed as a fetus and so maybe couldn't leap in a way his mother would feel, but the gospel writers might not have known or understood that. The important part is that the one who would prepare the way of the Lord knew who the Lord was before they were born. Yet when Jesus stood in the crowd listening to John's exhortations, John had no idea he was there. He didn't leap with joy upon seeing him – indeed, John the Baptizer never did anything with joy. He didn't even notice Jesus, and Jesus didn't tell him he was there. It's not even clear in Luke's gospel that John was the one who actually baptized Jesus, or if he did, that he knew that he'd done it. All we know is that when all the people (incl. Jesus) were baptized, the heavens opened, a dove descended, and there came a voice: "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Sting like a bee; that is the part Luke wants us to remember. God told Jesus that he was his beloved son and that he, God, was pleased with him – and did so in a way that made sure all the newly baptized, and their baptizers, heard it, too. Even they without ears were let in on it, because the Holy Spirit, *in specie columbae*¹,

¹ L. 'in the form of a dove'.

flew down to him. No-one else got the bird; the only one that had that happen to them was the Word.

Which all begs the question – and Luke would like us not to beg this question – of why Jesus was out there in the first place. By the river listening to John, that is. What do you think?

One answer is that he was ready to start his public ministry knew that it had to build on John's, and wanted to get out there to get John's blessing and maybe take on himself John's crowds and his thunder, be the fulfillment of which John spoke. However, there's nothing in the text to encourage us to read it this way. The closest thing to it is when Luke reminds us that Herod put John in prison, meaning that someone had to take up the "Repent Now!" mantle. Why not the Messiah?

Mostly because of what happens next: Jesus's temptation in the desert and his return to his hometown, both of which happen before he calls anyone to lay down their nets and follow him, he will make them fishers of people. It's an ill start to a public anything that has you gone for a month and a half right at the start, but that's what happens. All of which leads me to suspect that the reason Jesus is out there listening to John preach repentance and of the coming savior is that he thinks he needs to hear it, too, maybe even do likewise.

What's that you say, preacher? That Jesus goes down in the river because he wants to be baptized and set free from sin as well? Oh, that can't be. Jesus is without sin, we're told, born pure of a pure virgin, who like him was conceived without sin, plus he never did anything wrong, not really, except not tell his parents he was staying behind at the temple as the brightest boy in Bar Mitzvah class, arguing with the teachers [rabbi means teacher, btw. –ed.]. Maybe, but that doesn't mean he knew it. Plus, the stories that come down to us about Jesus as a boy show him

as being a brat. He had to learn in real time how to use for good the power of God that was within him. He had to mature, grow in wisdom and insight, in order to learn who he was, and to be good and good at it, at a pace he could absorb.

Everyone who is called to something that is theirs alone goes through a stage or two like this. It may mean getting used to your artistic talents, to the discipline they require in order to cultivate them, and to the burning, driving need within to use them to create something worthy of your life, its maker, and those talents and gifts. It may mean learning the hard way – and it is never easy – how to live in your own skin as who you truly are, no matter what the world or your family or society may want or even need to you be. Go home and tell your parents, who dreamed of a career in law and politics for you, that you plan to study religions and poetry and serve as a teacher and man of the cloth, and work on your art as best you can, when you can, and see how that goes. (But we done alright.)

People who are members of persecuted sexual minorities also know what this is like, as do people who have been victims of discrimination, racism, and other forms of persecution based on who they are. People who realize somewhere along the line that they have been born into the wrong body have to do this work as well. Such work is not easy even in a society that welcomes agender, genderfluid, genderqueer, intersex, gender-nonconforming, and transgender persons as readily as it does the cisgendered. It's even harder in a society in which adjudicated sexual assaulters, convicted felons, and their minions seek to increase their power by scapegoating the former six gender identities any which way they can. I can't help but add: do we really have to put up with another four years of this? And whom will they scapegoat next, stinging as they do whenever they see that their followers aren't angry enough or falling for last week's lies any more. But what more can

one say about people who choose not only not to love their neighbors as themselves, but to do (or threaten to do) anything to their neighbors that they damn well please? It is to weep.

Jesus – this is a sermon about Jesus, after all – had to learn in real time who he was and why. This included growing up and becoming an adult in a society in which someone like John the Baptizer found a ready audience with a message that cut to the quick and chilled to the bone. We all just heard it, and Jesus heard it to. I suspect that he felt that he had to – that he, too, might need to hear the message about sharing what he had with those who needed it, not to extort, to prepare the way of the Lord, and to be among the wheat, not the chaff. If he was ever to lead, let alone save, these people, he had to know what they were going through. He had to understand what had been done to them by others, and what they had done to themselves. Until that dove came down and that voice spoke out, Jesus might not have known who he was – or that God loved him as a parent loves a child, which is a love that can move mountains, and sometimes has to. Even if he did know, it couldn't but help to hear it out loud, and have everyone else hear it, too.

On this, the gospels agree: Jesus is God's Son, the beloved. The Holy Spirit came down upon him at his baptism, and he baptizes with it – with it, and with fire. God is well pleased with him. After all, he's taken the time he needed, and done the work he had to do, to be ready to go out there to heal people, speak truth to power and powerless alike, and save the world.

To put it simply: any parent would be pleased to have such a child – particularly when one of that parent's names is 'Love'. *Amen.*