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The Baptism of the Lord

Thomas Gumbleton | Jan. 17, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

I?m sure we are all aware that today when we celebrate this Feast of the Baptism of Jesus, we are bringing to a completion the Advent and Christmas season. Over the past couple of months, we remembered the Annunciation to Mary, the Visitation and then the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, and then Jesus being brought to the temple for circumcision and the giving of his name. Then also, the time he was presented in the temple where he was purified. Then also, the time when Jesus was lost and then found in the temple by Mary and Joseph.

After that, we?re told in Matthew?s Gospel that Jesus went with them to Nazareth and grew in wisdom, age and grace. So we begin then the long period of time where Jesus was living in very quiet circumstances, unknown to the world about him, but growing in wisdom, in age -- becoming physically older -- and grace, deepening his awareness of God in his life. At this point, Jesus is an adult and we come to an event that is a very significant turning point in the life of Jesus.

It?s a beginning of his clear understanding that God has called him to proclaim the good news about God?s love, the good news about the reign of God, the good news that calls us to change our lives in order to follow him. This experience at the river Jordan was a very profound experience in the life of Jesus. I think most of us probably think that Jesus knew all along who he was, what he was to do, what would happen to him at the end when he would be tortured and executed, and then raised from the dead, but Jesus was fully human.

It?s a profound mystery of course, because he was also fully god, but in his humanness, Jesus did not know all that was to happen. So at this moment, as he becomes an adult and begins his public life, he experiences a very extraordinary coming of the power of God upon him. In the three gospels that recount the baptism of Jesus, there are a few differences, and each is somewhat significant. In Mark?s Gospel, Mark simply says Jesus came up out of the water after being baptized by John, then begins his preaching, so there?s hardly any detail.

In Matthew?s Gospel, we hear how John said, ?No, no. I shouldn?t baptize you; you should be baptizing me.? Remember, John had recognized Jesus as the lamb of God, so John felt Jesus should baptize him, but Jesus insisted. There are a couple of reasons why Matthew would put that into his Gospel and they may be helpful to us in our reflection of this event. First of all, it reminds us that in the early church, there were still those who wanted to be disciples of John, especially in Matthew?s community, which was a Jewish community.

There were many that were still saying, ?We should follow John the Baptist. We were first committed to him, no reason to change.? So this incident is put into the gospel to emphasize no, Jesus is the one and we must follow him. That?s what John is insisting, so people who were still thinking of John as the one they should follow perhaps were being moved now to really follow Jesus. Also, that incident reminds us how much Jesus wanted to enter into our lives and into our experience.

He wanted really to be like us, so he underwent this baptism for the repentance of sin, even though he was not a sinner in any way, but he was like us in every way and he wanted to emphasize that he too would undergo this baptism of repentance to show his solidarity with us who are sinners, so he really is one with us. That?s reassuring for us as we take the time to reflect upon it.

But a small point that is in Luke?s Gospel, which I think also is very important, and it?s different from Mark or Matthew, is that Luke says after the baptism, Jesus went apart by himself to pray. It was during that time of prayer where he was entering into deep communion with God, that Jesus experienced, deep within his own heart, in his own spirit, that voice of God. In Luke, the voice says, ?You are my chosen one, my beloved. In you I am well pleased.?

Jesus was hearing God affirming him -- everything that he had done, God was saying, ?Yes, you are the beloved. You are my chosen one.? As we reflect upon that and we too try to follow Jesus through our baptism, and later today we?ll repeat our baptismal promises, it?s a moment when we too could experience God saying to me, each of us: ?You are my beloved, my chosen one. In you I am well pleased.?

What a blessing it is that God would affirm us in that way, yet through our baptism, that?s exactly what God does for each of us. ?You are my beloved. I love you, my chosen one. You are precious to me.? If we could really let that enter deeply into our spirit, it would bring us a great sense of joy and peace, knowing that we are so beloved by God. That?s what Jesus experienced and that?s what we too can experience through the grace of our baptism.

But then, something else that this experience of Jesus does, and it?s very important because again, through our baptism, we commit ourselves to follow Jesus, to be one of his disciples, so we have to know where Jesus was led by God so we follow. When Jesus hears God saying those words ?You are my beloved, my chosen one. In you I am well pleased,? Jesus would immediately?we wouldn?t do it so quickly because we don?t know the Hebrew scriptures as he did, but Jesus knew those scriptures -- that?s what he was raised on. He had memorized many of the passages from all the books of the Bible that were part of the Jewish heritage. So Jesus would have recognized what we heard in our first lesson today: ?Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one, in whom I delight.?

But then Jesus would have remembered what came after that. ?I have put my spirit upon him and he will bring true justice to all of the nations.? He has a mission to bring God?s righteousness, God?s justice, to the nations.

Further on, ?he will make justice appear in truth. I?ve called you for the sake of justice. I will hold your hand to make you firm. I will make you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open eyes that do not see, to free captives from prison, to bring out to light those who sit in darkness.? Jesus has a mission to bring God?s justice, God?s goodness, God?s righteousness, the fullness of God?s reign into our world, to transform our world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible.

That?s his mission, but now -- and Jesus really would understand this and take this to heart -- there?s a very special way in which he must bring that justice to the world. It?s not through force, it?s not through wealth, prestige and power; it?s through love, through non-violence, active love, because the servant does not shout or raise his voice, proclamations are not heard in the streets, a broken reed he does not crush, nor will he snuff out the wavering flame, and yet will bring true justice.

The words ?will not raise his voice and cry out in the streets,? that would be a call to arms, and so the spirit of God bringing true justice transforming our world, is not going to do it through arms, through violence, but rather this servant of God will do it through gentleness, nurturing, love. Think of the bruised reed. If you?ve ever tried to grow something, you know it takes nurturing, it takes care, it takes gentleness. That?s how the servant of God

will be. Or the flame that?s just about to go out, you have to draw it carefully into a fullness of light; you can?t do it too quickly, too harshly.

Those are poetic terms perhaps, yet the message is so clear: Jesus is to bring true justice, transform our world, but to do it through love, one of the most challenging things, of course, to which he could be called. Yet Jesus followed that out throughout his whole life and later on as he preaches, when you look at the Sermon on the Mount especially, where he calls us to love not just those who love us, but to love even our enemies. He calls us to reject hatred, not to respond to violence with violence. Yet have we really heard that message?

Each of us in our own heart, do we really try to live that gentle, nurturing, loving way of that servant of Yahweh, who is Jesus? I remember, it was about a year and a half ago, in October 2006, that terrible tragedy that took place in a tiny town in Lancaster County, Pa. Nickel Mines was the name of the village or town -- it was an Amish community -- and there was a one-room schoolhouse there. A man from the town who was hired and was known to all the people because he delivered milk in the community, came to that school with guns.

Most of the children and the teachers were let go, but 10 children he kept and he was going to murder them. One little girl, a 13-year old, the oldest one, who immediately understood she was in charge of the others said, ?No, kill me and let the others go.? An extraordinary thing for a youngster, yet she was able to say that, willing to give her life for the others. But he didn?t let them go and one who had left earlier had called 9-1-1 and the police, by this time, had come. He had already barricaded the school closed though, so then, when he realized the police were there, he began to shoot.

The police broke through the barricade and came in, but already five of the children were either killed, close to dying. Perhaps one or two died in the arms of the police. Five survived. It was a terrible tragedy, and it became a news item immediately. Probably most of us remember. But what became even a greater news item was the fact that that community and the parents of those children immediately forgave and acted with love toward the killer and his family.

He killed himself, but they forgave him, and within hours, some of the Amish community were at the home of his widow and three children to comfort her and those children. They continued their love for them at the time of the funeral a few days later. Over half of the church where the funeral took place for the killer was filled with Amish people -- more than half of the congregation. It was an extraordinary example of people who really do follow the way of Jesus.

A book has just been published recently called *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*. One of the things that I noticed in this book that?s, I think, a really important lesson for us as we reflect on how Jesus calls us, is where the author says, ?How did the Amish decide so quickly to extend forgiveness? That question brought laughter from some Amish people we interviewed. ?You mean some people actually thought we got together to plan forgiveness?? chuckled Katie, a 75-year-old grandmother, as she worked in her kitchen.

? ?Forgiveness was a decided issue,? explained Bishop [Ely], ?It?s just what we do as a non-resistive people following Jesus.? It was spontaneous, it was automatic; it was not a new thing. Every Amish person we spoke with agreed: Forgiveness for the killer and grace for his family had begun as spontaneous expressions of faith, not as mandates from the church. That the outside world was surprised at Amish forgiveness in turn surprised the Amish people. ?Why is everybody all surprised?? asked one man, ?It?s just standard Christian forgiveness. It?s what everybody should be doing.

? ?Before the media made such a big deal of forgiveness, I had never realized that it was so much a part of our life. I just never realized before how simple it is to us.??

So these are people who know the way of Jesus and automatically, almost without thinking, know where they

have to go first -- it?s to forgive, to extend love, even to those who did evil to them.

The final part that I think is important in this place in the book is: ?When forgiveness arrived at the killer?s home within hours of his crime, it did not appear out of nowhere. Rather, forgiveness is woven into the very fabric of Amish life, its sturdy threads having been spun from faith in God, scriptural mandates, and a history of persecution. The grace extended by the Amish surprised the world almost as much as the killing itself. Indeed, in many respects, the story of Amish forgiveness became *the* story, the story that trumped the narrative of senseless death in the days that followed the shooting.

?Amish grace and the way it affected the world did not rob the tragedy of its horror, nor did it eradicate the grief of those left behind. Still it may have been an answer to Amish prayers, that somehow, somewhere, some good would come out of this terrible event.?

See, their witness is something that speaks powerfully to us on this day when we reflect on the call of Jesus to transform our world, to bring true justice to the world, but to do it not through violence of any kind; to do it through love.

That example is one that I hope we might hold before us as each of us tries to discover how we can better follow the way of Jesus in our personal lives, in our family lives, in how we try to influence the world around us, how we try to influence our public policies, so that we can bring that spirit of Jesus into every aspect of our lives. If we do, we will truly be faithful to our baptism and we will share with Jesus in his work of transforming our world into the reign of God.

[Bishop Gumbleton's homily of Jan. 13, 2008, was preached at St. Hilary
Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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