

January 12, 2020

Delight of God's Life

Matthew 3:13-17

I want to begin by referring to the recent Netflix film, *The Two Popes*, that is a film where two actors imagine a series of conversations between Pope Benedict XVI, the one known at one time as Cardinal Ratzinger and present day Pope Francis, formerly known as Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio. Both of the men are presented in the story as less than perfect people. They each come to a point of disappointment in themselves and regrets for past decisions. So, the film humanizes the two popes, while exploring their different visions for the church. My limited research shows that this story is largely fictional and speculative and some of the characterization has been called false. Regardless, I like the story.

The viewer is asked to consider whether the church is an unchanging refuge from the chaos and evil of the world (Pope Benedict view), or the manifestation of Christ's body through the messy lives of human beings (Pope Francis view). The film leads us to believe that the reigning pope saw the need to shift the church towards being with the people in their messy lives and that is one of the reasons he came to denounce his authority, hence Benedict being replaced with Francis and us having two living popes.

In the onscreen conversation between these two men, they discuss change versus compromise. According to Benedict early in the movie, "change is compromise," and he adamantly states that God does not change. The man who becomes Pope Francis counters saying that God does change---God moves toward us and "we find him on the journey with us."

Here we are today, overlooking the baptismal font of a young healthy boy, with his whole life ahead of him. Given our experience this morning, today's reading has something to say for those who hold the view that God moves toward us. And it has something to say for those who hold on to the past. John the Baptist was offering a baptism of repentance. "Turn your old life in for a kingdom life!" Throw out your sins of the past, forget them and those ways you have experienced, the weight of regret you are carrying and breathe in fresh air. "Let me wash away your old ways in this river and leave you squeaky clean for you are going to turn your life around to God's ways!"

John the Baptist knew Baptism was about starting anew, wiping the slate clean. What he did not know was the powerful nature of Baptism in to Christ.

There is a scene from an August Wilson play entitled, Ma Rainey. The play is about African American Jazz musicians rehearsing in a Chicago recording studio. It is set in the 1920's. At one point they take a break from their rehearsal and they begin to tell stories.

One of them tells the story about a cousin of his, a minister whose sister in Atlanta was desperately ill and so he took a train to Atlanta to visit her. The train stopped in a little south Georgia town to take on water, and the minister got off the train to use the bathroom. He went into the station and was told "colored people' can't use the bathroom inside, but have to use the outhouse. So he went to the outhouse and while he was there the train left the station. There's the minister standing on a south Georgia railroad platform - no train, no friends.

Across the tracks there's a group of hostile-looking young white men, and not wanting trouble, the minister simply starts walking up the railroad track. The men follow him. They surround him. They demand to know who he is and what he's doing in their south Georgia train station.

He tells them, "I am a minister." He shows them his Bible, he shows them his cross, he tells them his sister in Atlanta is sick, and the train has left him. No matter - dance for us they say - dance - why don't you dance for us? Someone pulls out a pistol and begins to fire at the ground and they make him dance.

The one telling the story says, "Can you imagine that. Can you believe they did that to a man of God?" One of the other musicians says, "What I can't believe is that if he were a man of God, why did God let them do it to him? If he was God's own man why didn't God bring down fire from heaven and destroy those crackers? That's what I want to know."

That's what John asks Jesus. Why have you come for my baptism? I'm waiting for your baptism of fire. I'm waiting for you to separate the wheat from the chaff. I'm waiting for the realm of heaven to be established so righteousness, peace, and justice rule both the day and the night. Why are you standing here in this stream asking me to baptize you? Well, Jesus tells him to go ahead anyway, the reading aunt Laura shared from the version called, The Message, puts these words to Jesus' lips, "Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." and John consents. Then, the heavens are opened, and all the power of God descends upon Jesus. Matthew doesn't tell us whether John sees or whether John hears what happens next - we're only told that the power of God descends upon Jesus 'like a dove.' Think about that - all the power of God alights on Jesus, and it's 'like a dove.' John the Baptist expected something with a lot more conventional fire power.

The Holy Spirit comes, not as a destroying fire, but as a dove (of peace?). A voice from the heavens speaks. In Mt, this annunciation is in the third person, "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life." -- apparently addressed to the bystanders -- or at least to Mt's readers. Mt's account is more like an epiphany directed to the people, than a divine call directed to Jesus.

In the Gospel stories we read during this Epiphany season, God parts the curtain for brief, shimmering moments, allowing us to look beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our lives, and catch glimpses of the extraordinary. Which is perhaps another way of describing the sacrament of baptism, one of the thin places where the "extraordinary" of God's grace blesses the ordinary water we use to mark this event today.

Let's focus on those words, "delight of my life." When we are young and beautiful and fall in love with that special someone who seems the only one for us, we know what that's like to say to our spouse "you are the delight of my life." And when life has given us a few tumbles and our love has grown deeper and despite the years dulling the shine of beauty a bit, we are still in love, so we can say with even greater meaning "you are the delight of my life." Likewise, our children become individuals and develop their gifts and personalities over the years-in our best family reflections, parents say, "you guys are the delight of our lives."

Well, this morning, right before us, as Luke has been Baptized we hear off somewhere not too far away the 'extraordinary' Spirit's voice: "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, he and each and every one of you are the delight of my life."

That is our work for today, for this new year, for this community of faith. Hear that each and every one of you, you are the delight of God's life. Let that sink in. Do you know it? Do you feel it?

In what we do, as parents and grandparents with our children, in what we teach about Jesus to our children, they need to hear and feel that they are the delight of God's life. And we and they need to hear it again and again throughout our lives. The person who has this and can hang on to it will find this to be their most prized possession-it is extraordinary!

How can we do this? How can we pass this on? I want to challenge you this morning. I want to challenge you to think about this responsibility and how you can do it as individuals or as families alone. I'm biased of course, but I think we can do this more effectively with a supportive Christian community. It is an awesome thing. And our task is not just to give this assurance to those who come to our front. Our task is to take that assurance out to all we encounter.

Early in December, 70 year old, Neil McKay was in the middle of a curling game at the neighbourhood club in St. Albert, Alberta. All of a sudden he felt woozy and passed out. It turns out he was having a heart attack. His teammates called out for help. Working the bar upstairs was licensed practical nurse, Jessica who rushed down to help. She started doing chest compressions on Neil to keep his blood flowing. On the next sheet of ice was a firefighter. He identified himself, came and took over the chest compressions. Jessica fired up the defibrillator which had been donated to the club several years ago.

About two minutes after a shock was administered McKay regained consciousness and was taken to hospital by ambulance. McKay says, "It's almost unbelievable how all these little bits and pieces of miracles added up into one big miracle." Though the ambulance arrived in five minutes, if everyone had waited that long, the outcome would not have been as life-giving.

We live in a world with many uncertainties and with many people who don't have a sense of being loved, cared for, cherished. We can come across people at any time, who have lost hope, become lifeless, others who believe the shame they have lived scars them forever. We have the power to bring new life to the life-less, to re-charge hearts, to listen and touch and heal. Miracles do happen right in front of us. With our help, they too will one day hear the voice, "You are chosen and marked by my love, you are the delight of my life." It is a big task, yet, we are not alone. Thanks be to God!