



BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

JANUARY 12, 2020

"THE NEXT STEP"

MATTHEW 3: 13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

SERMON

I am a terrible dancer. You might think that, because i am a musician, i would be a natural twinkle toes. Sadly, that is not true.

Years ago, deb and i decided to take ballroom dancing lessons. It seemed like a good idea. You know, build closeness, intimacy, togetherness.

I was dreadful.

So bad that the instructor, a trim, fit former circus star, took me in his arms and forcibly led me around the dance floor, intent on showing me the next step. All he did was publicly shame me in front of a roomful of people.

I could never learn the next step, but would return to deb's side drenched in anxious perspiration....

In today's gospel, Jesus sees **his** next step as being baptized by john, even though john doesn't get it. Baptism is an initiation, a doorway into a relationship with the divine. And Jesus sees his baptism as connected to *righteousness*.

That's a word we don't use much in conversation, so what does *righteousness* mean?

Something like this: having been initiated into a relationship with god, how do we reflect god's character in our lives and how do we co-create a world where justice prevails for all people? This is being righteous.

If Jesus is only a divine being—god—then his being baptized makes no sense. But if Jesus is also fully human, then he, too, is involved in this relational dance of building character and striving for justice.

To put it bluntly. Jesus has become human so we might become divine....



This is pretty heady stuff. And we may not even be aware that each step we take in our lives moves us toward a deeper sense of being divine and human.

Now you can ponder this statement for a long time....

One of the benefits of being older is that it becomes possible to look back on one's life and see that what might have seemed like accidents, coincidences, troubles, illnesses, sufferings, missteps, are not a series of random events, but together comprise a theme, a direction, a developing story, a coherent series of steps taken. All within this human process of deepening into god's character and into divine justice.

I've told the story before, but it bears repeating in this context.

I was in therapy after a series of traumatic events and my therapist asked me to take a number of psychological tests to quantify just how messed up i was. Looking back, this was the next step in my process. And not all steps are meant to be fun, right?

Upon completion, i met with him to discuss the results. He looked at me, "given your life, you should be really messed up." That's quite a professional diagnosis, right—*really messed up*. But he said, "The tests show that you're not. Perhaps you need to consider what you've been saved for."

Let's be clear. This does not mean that I'm special in some way. I was just told that day what is true for each of us.

Perhaps **you** need to consider what you've been saved for.

You have each come into the world with some purpose. There is a "something else" to your life that makes your life more than different day, same old crap.

Now we really don't want to get grandiose about this, as if we each **have a purpose!!!!**

It's more like, in your little corner of the world, what are the contributions that only you can make? What is the difference that only you can make?

Following Jesus is about being as faithful to your purpose as Jesus was to his.

And just like it was for Jesus, each of us is to fulfill all righteousness. That is, by deepening into our humanity, we discover our divinity.

The older Christian teachers were quite open about this.

St. Maximus put it this way: "god made all beings to enjoy the same union of humanity and divinity that was united in Christ."



St. Athanasius wrote that “god in Christ became the bearer of flesh for a time in order that humanity might become the bearer of spirit forever.”

We could call this **the great exchange**. Jesus is meant to be the guarantee that divinity indeed resides within us, which is always our greatest doubt and denial.

Who me?

I’m not worthy. I’m not worthy.

Now I’m not speaking of our little self—the ego—the ridiculous me that worries and frets and make judgments and thinks crazy thoughts and is overwhelmed by feelings.

No, I’m referring to the deeper self, the Christ self within, the larger self. As Paul says, “it is no longer i who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

The word for this whole process is incarnation. The joining of the physical and spiritual worlds within each of our lives.

Without some form of incarnation, god remains separate from us and all creation. God remains up there and out of sight. Without incarnation, it is not an enchanted universe, but an empty one.

Think about it. What was Christmas about? *Emmanuel*. God with us. God became human in a hooked-nosed middle eastern Jew without an identifiable father who died at the age of thirty-three.

Yet, the material and spiritual are shown to be one in Jesus Christ. Who came to reveal that the material and the spiritual are one throughout the universe?

It is all connected....

For example, what do we say about the bread and wine we receive every week? That Jesus Christ—human and divine—dead and alive again—is present “in, with and under” the physical bread and wine.

And spiritual reality—divine presence—is present “in, with, and under” you and your children and your dog and the tree in your front yard and the Atlantic ocean and the grand Teton mountains and the deer leaving scat in your backyard and your neighbor who is a pain in the leister.

As Paul writes, “in Christ you also are being built into a dwelling place of god in the spirit.”

This is an incarnational worldview, where we see the divine in everyone and everything.



When we come to know this in our heart and head, in our spirit and soul, then it becomes much more difficult to mistreat yourself or anyone or anything in the world....

We are all involved in this great dance of divine love and grace. Which is moving toward the end point of a new heaven and a new earth re-created in the image of this love and grace....

And so, what about the next step?

The first next step. We each have to decide whether we are going to consciously live in a way that we remain aware, as much as we are able, to this divine reality working within the stuff of the earth, within the stuff of our lives. As Paul says, “we have these treasures in earthen vessels.”

Now the divine pattern will have its way with us one way or another. It just goes a heck of a lot better if we consciously participate. Otherwise, divine reality is forced on us and experienced more like fate.

So as much as possible, we want to find the rhythm, where we experience life as a series of natural and spontaneous steps. If we resist them, it only creates strife. We let reality be reality. We let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.

Next step, we can all consciously participate in this divine dance by paying attention to something we do involuntarily every moment. We breathe. But every time we take in a breath, we are repeating the pattern of taking spirit into matter. In Hebrew, they use the same word for spirit and breath. So, every time we breathe out, we are returning spirit to the material world. In this way, we stay in touch with the unity of spirit and matter revealed in Jesus.

It is thought that the Old Testament name for god, Yahweh, came from the practice of breathing the name of god. Yah—weh. Yah—weh, in a kind of continual prayer.

Third step is that the next step does not need to be the right step. In AA, they talk about analysis paralysis. We can ruminate about the **right next step** and then remain standing frozen.

We learn more from our missteps than from our successes, as painful as they can be. As someone told me after deb and i had lost our shirts trying to flip a house: “some educations are more expensive than others.”

Further, from one point of view, we could say that Jesus took some horrible steps in choosing his disciples. Judas betrays him. Peter is dumber than a box of rocks. Thomas doubts him. Most of the guys continually fight over who’s going to be in charge when Jesus is king, which shows an incredible misunderstanding of who he is. But it all seems to work out in the end.



Marie lousy von Franz, the brilliant Jungian analyst, advises us to not get anxious about the next step. No step is going to be entirely correct, so down the line we will see what doesn't work about our "right step." And even a painful misstep contains seeds of growth and healing. It's a graceful universe.

The **next step** only takes us so far. In the rapid pace of our world, it may be hard to hold onto the truth that change is incremental. Transformation moves slowly. We are healed by degrees. This is why patience is a virtue that is hard to learn....

Sometimes, though, we must stop and take stock of where we are stepping.

I worked on a surveying crew on Hilton Head Island. This was just as the island was beginning to be developed.

I was first in the crew line walking down a stream in a swampy backwater part of the island when someone behind me yelled, "stop!"

I froze and a machete came whoosing down just out of sight of my right ear. Turns out a water moccasin was hanging from a tree branch and slithering toward my head.

Reading between the lines of this story, you might pick up that my steps and my stopping takes place within the community of the surveying crew. We are a team. We are watching out for one another. We might not be best buds, but there is a level of care and concern for one another.

Suggesting that it works best if we take the next step or pause in our stepping or listen and stop within the safety of community. It doesn't need to be a faith community like CLC, yet the spirit is moving us forward step-by-step.

In this New Year, think about not taking your next step in isolation. It usually is not safe for us to go into our heads alone....

Typically, the average person needs eight or more deep friends, small groups or communities to maintain good mental health. And we'll be doing more this year to build such groups and communities within our larger community.

So, take into careful account. Become more aware of your life path. Remain open to where the divine is tugging on your humanity. Where are the steps that lead to a righteous life within your corner of the world?

And CLC is meant to be a place to help you with your next step.

SERMON SONG

Nearer To You by Elvis Costello and Allen Toussaint