

Blessed by Being—Mark 1: 1-11
(January 7, 2018-Baptism of Jesus)

As we all know, winter driving can be a disorienting experience. When I lived in Parry Sound the squalls that came in off the bay could turn a well-marked four-lane highway into a narrow snow covered country lane within a short period. With little or no visibility, you have no idea where you are in relation to the road and other drivers. In this post-Christmas/Epiphany season Mark's gospel can do that to you. It can make you feel a bit disoriented, trying to make sense of where you are in the story of Jesus. One thing is for sure, the Christmas pageant will never be based on Mark's gospel. Instead, we hear from Luke, Matthew and even the poet John who start their accounts of Jesus' life chronologically, at the beginning. Luke gives us the classic birth story of Jesus in a humble manger, Matthew traces Jesus' lineage all the way back to Abraham, and John the poet takes us back to the dawn of creation: "In the beginning was the word". However, Mark introduces Jesus to us at his baptism. It is as if Jesus just popped out of the sky onto the banks of the Jordan River. And then to add to the disorientation, we have this blessing that God bestows upon Jesus, "You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." Why does Mark start us here and why does Mark have God bestow this blessing on Jesus? Jesus has not done a thing yet in Mark's gospel: no miracles, no healings, no teachings, nothing.

As I reflected on this some more I came to realize that maybe this feeling of disorientation lies more with me than it did does with Mark. Let's start with the blessing. From our earliest days a pattern develops where we measure the worth of our lives and the lives of others mainly by accomplishments: the number of A's on our report cards, the teams we make, the people we date, the size of our house, the amount of our RRSP's and on and on. We call ourselves human beings, but in reality we behave like human doings. All this doing is always fleeting, no matter how great the accomplishment.

Sir Edmund Hilary, the first person to summit Mount Everest was asked what he experienced when he reached the peak. Hilary replied, "The first sentiment was one of ecstatic accomplishment, but then there came a sense of desolation. What was there now left to do?"¹ When we define ourselves by our accomplishments, we are on the road to exhaustion and despair. We need an identity rooted in deeper soil, something more enduring and sustaining. We are human beings after all, not human doings.

That deeper identity is part of the good news in our faith story today; Jesus' great accomplishment in being baptized by John was simply that he claimed his identity as one of God's children. God blesses Jesus not for what Jesus has accomplished but simply because Jesus claims his identity as God's beloved child. Mark had come to see that this was the very core of Jesus' identity. For Mark, Jesus' life and accomplishments flowed from living into this identity.

When we look at the Gospel of Mark this way, the squall lifts and we get re-oriented, we find our place. The author of Mark sees the beginning of the story of Jesus not at birth, but at the moment when Jesus grounds himself in an identity that will allow him to do God's work. Jesus needed an identity that would not fail him, an identity that

¹ Sir Edmund Hillary as quoted at <http://www.templeinaino.org/t051803.htm>

would sustain him throughout, an identity that would allow him to forsake a life of social acceptance and security in order to do God's work in the world. An identity that wasn't dependent on the approval of others or the aspirations of the ego. Jesus was not blessed for what he had accomplished—he was blessed for claiming the truth of who he was—a beloved child of God.

This blessing, this gift of grace is available to us all. There are blessings to be had when claim our identity as God's children. We have the freedom to accept or reject this relationship. But, if we accept it, we are being true to ourselves in the deepest and most profound sense. Much like when we behold a newborn baby and are awed not by what the child has done but who the child is--a miracle of life from God. When we live our lives primarily as God's children, we become most fully human beings because we are freed from the tyranny of accomplishment. This does not mean we sit around waiting for the second coming. What it does mean is that we will move away from being defined by our successes and failures; we will move away from having our self-worth at the mercy of our bank accounts, the next performance review, the next pay cheque, the next compliment, the next insult, the next visit from our children. Our identity will more and more rest secure in the love of the God that created us, sustains us and carries us deeper into life. This identity roots us, grounds us, holds us when people and events strive to make us feel inadequate. It also frees us to take risks for the sake of love.

A few years ago I came across an article in the United Church Observer magazine that illustrates just this.² At the top of the article is a picture; in the background are three people you would easily recognize as being part of any United Church congregation. In the foreground taking up most of the picture's surface area is the back of a young man with a tattoo of the devil staring directly at you from the back of his shaved head. The article is the story of Sackville United Church in New Brunswick and their ministry to inmates who are about to be paroled, in this case the inmate's name is Derrick. Three members of the church get together once a month with Derrick and simply accompany him on outings to coffee shops, art galleries, lunch or shopping. The goal of the group is simply to be like a family, a support system and provide Derrick with some sense of normality outside prison life. Derrick has been changed by the experience and encourages other inmates to get involved "I tell those guys, these people just want to help you... They assure you there's more to life than sitting in a prison cell thinking about your next crime."

What does it take to respond to the call to this kind of ministry? This cannot be easy work. How do you risk forming a relationship with a social outcast in the face of your fears and others' judgements? I think the only way to do it is to claim for yourself and for those whom you might judge, an identity that is both enduring and unwavering. An identity that allows you to risk for the sake of love—a child of God, a beloved son, a beloved daughter; open to life in all it's vulnerability and it's invitations to relationship. They do this work because of who they are, they are God's children, Derrick is God's child, and they are called to love him. Because of this, the world is a better place and lives are saved and transformed.

² Sara Jewel, *Befriending a Prisoner*, The Observer, January 2009, p. 18.

Here is more grace, it's a bit of a paradox, the moment we claim our identity as God's child and stop defining ourselves by our accomplishments or others' opinions of us our actions actually take on more significance. Seemingly, inconsequential acts like having lunch, shopping, visiting art galleries or going for a cup of coffee become imbued with profound importance because each one of those activities reveals the love of God to another human being

When what we do flows from who we are, flows from our identity as a child of God, we become agents of God's love, peace and justice. What greater accomplishment could there be? The Holy One calls out to us, asking us to disorient ourselves to the world and orient ourselves to grace. It is a call that says to me to you, you, you, you are my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased. Thanks be to God.

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