

Standing in the Water with Jesus

January 12, 2020

I

Well, there Jesus stands ... waist-deep in water, water that's teeming with sinners ... sorry, miserable lot that they are! I mean, if you've ever read the arrest record in some newspaper, you know the kind I'm talking about. Arrested for drunk driving, bad checks, petty larceny, assault and battery. I mean, some are notorious sinners, scandals to their community! And then some are there for crimes known only to themselves ... in their own hearts. ... You know, secret sinners, having no illusions about themselves from inside out. And they all come to be washed and cleaned by John the Baptist.

And now here stands Jesus, smack in the middle of that crowd: Shows up ... and just gets in line with 'em.

Now at the time, of course, no one knew much about Jesus ... only that He was John's cousin, a carpenter down from Galilee. But of course then later – after the heavens opened up and the Voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” ... and then after His short ministry ... and after that first Sunday morning Easter ... well, Jesus' lining up here on the banks of the Jordan became pretty much of an embarrassment to the early church.

'Cause why was He ... if He was so sinless ... why was He baptized? I mean, look at the four Gospel accounts of of this scene. And by the way, you can be pretty sure it happened just about this way, cause despite the embarrassment, all four Gospels do mention this scene.

Mark's in a rush about saying it; says that immediately when Jesus came up from the water, the heavens tore open and the Spirit descended on Jesus. And Matthew here has John and Jesus engage in a little debate, with John arguing that no, he should be the one baptized by Jesus.

And John's gospel – now John's is so defensive – he just reports the Baptist saying that yes, he saw that Spirit descend on Jesus, without ever mentioning the fact that Jesus was standing up to his ankles in water at the time. And then we have Luke's account of the story. Now Luke doesn't actually ever mention John the Baptist at all in his scene ('cause according to Luke, John happened to be in jail at the time).

But Luke just reports matter-of-factly that after all the people were baptized and Jesus was also baptized, the voice from heaven breaks through: “You are my Son, the Beloved; and with you I am well pleased.”

So I think this is an embarrassment to the early church ... and by the way, one of the surest proofs that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. 'Cause as someone's said, when somebody tells you something that's not in his own best interest, you can be reasonably sure that he's telling you the truth.

So here we are. But here's my question. What was Jesus doing being baptized in the first place? John the Baptist makes it clear that his Baptism, his washing is for sinners to come clean. So why did Jesus have any need for a bath like this? Why'd He wade into all that muck, teeming with "spiritual bacteria?"

There was a book out a few years ago called The Patron Saint of Liars. And it's the story of Rose Clinton and her daughter Cecilia, who happen to live at St. Elizabeth's Home for Unwed Mothers somewhere in the mountains of Kentucky.

Now Rose is the cook, and her child Cecilia is the darling of that place, petted and mothered by all the young women who'll soon give their own babies up for adoption.

Well one May day when the daughter Cecilia is now 15 years old, she meets one of the new girls who's come to St. Elizabeth's. The girl's name is Lorraine – just a skinny little thing, with a head full of red curls. And in this scene Lorraine's about to have a nervous breakdown ... scared to death while she waits to be interviewed by Mother Corrine, the nun in charge.

So Cecilia decides to help her out by giving her some advice. She tells Lorraine, "The guy who got you pregnant. Don't say he's dead. Everybody does that. And it makes Mother Corrine crazy."

So Lorraine sits on her hands and is quiet for a minute. Then she says, "I was going to say that."

"See?" Cecilia replies.

"So what do I tell her?"

"I don't know," Cecilia says. "Tell her the truth. Or tell her you don't remember."

Then Lorraine asks, "What did you tell her?"

At that, Cecilia is speechless.

Later, Cecilia wrote a friend: "I sat there, absolutely frozen ... I felt like I was going to be sick. No one, no one had ever, ever mistaken me for one of them – not even as a joke. And ... and I thought I was gonna pass out."

See, I think it was because Cecilia had been mistaken for one of them – one of those weak people whose bad decisions had ruined their lives, who'd done something so shameful that their own families had packed them off to live with strangers 'til the "evidence could be put up for adoption."

So: Cecilia thought she was going to pass out, 'cause she'd been mistaken for one of them, a sinner, an outcast ... when in fact she'd done nothing wrong. Ever. I mean, she's not that kind! And here this girl thought she was. And she was devastated.

See, it wasn't as if Cecilia hated those other girls ... no, she'd always been friendly, you know, tried to help 'em out ... give 'em good advice. She'd just never, ever expected to be taken for one of them.

Because in her own mind, she herself was in a different category altogether, a different order. Why, she was pure, a virgin, and thought anyone could see that. She was definitely not one of them!

So there Jesus stands, soaked in unholy water and surrounded by sinners. And you see the problem, don't you? How could He have done that? How ... could He have let Himself be taken for one of them?

Now. You and I – most of us spend a lot of time in the church talking about God's love for sinners. But I think we probably go to a lot of trouble not to be taken for one of them, don't we? Guilt by association, you know. Well, Jesus doesn't seem to be too bothered about that. Seems that for Him, God's being with us included God's really being with us, being in that river, standing in the muck, side-by-side with all the riffraff, all those punks and penny-ante undesirables ... radically joined with the likes of ... us all.

And then ... then what did He do ... at least in some of the Gospel stories? He stood there praying ... praying of all things ... and suddenly ... maybe all His yearnings, His searchings ... were brought into focus ... maybe becoming open to God's Spirit filling Him, empowering Him for the journey ahead – that journey that led all the way to Calvary and beyond.

Well of course, Jesus was pretty unique in his prayerful openness to the Spirit. But think about this: By his very birth in a stable, by this stepping in line and taking his baptismal turn in the Jordan, he joined himself to you and me. And so God is with us all – all us riffraff – in the river of life.

II

OK. Guilt by association. See, I think that's what Jesus did when he stepped into that muddy water. 'Cause I don't think Jesus stands at a distance from our faults, our frailties, our darkness. No, we're all together in that river. So when you and I confess our sins here this morning, we maybe do kneel and talk to God about the evil in our heart, and the evil in all humanity ... all the things I as a person ... and all the things we, as a people, as a nation, have done and failed to do. All the ways you and I have fled from the love of God – 'cause we're afraid to be seen, afraid to be taken for one of them, afraid to be known ... afraid to be changed.

And so I believe when you and I celebrate the gift of life here ... when we step into that water and baptize our own ... we do not do it simply for ourselves. No, you say your alleluias on behalf of all those who've discovered hope in the midst of darkness, life in the midst of death. 'Cause nothing we do here is a private matter, between me and God. Between you and God. 'Cause like Jesus in the river, this is something we do in common, in union, in communion, in common with all humankind.

III

Well you know, finally – getting back to that Gospel scene this morning – it still amazes me. 'Cause as sinless, Jesus did have every right to keep separate from us, maybe just offer to give John the Baptist a hand, but never, never Himself step into that stream.

And I think maybe at the heart of it all, the real sinlessness of Jesus, His real sinlessness – is found in this utter solidarity with all us sinners. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder, wading into all the mire of our lives.

Well. Again, finally: I have to tell you, I still don't completely get it! 'Cause in the end, this is still hard for me to grasp. Always has been. I do not really, completely understand the baptism of Jesus Christ. I do not completely understand why Jesus wanted to get more than His feet wet with sinners like you and me.

But He just did. He did join himself with us, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. Emmanuel, with us. Says, "You ... you are my child." And God is pleased ... very pleased indeed.

Amen.