Sermon - The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of our Lord
The Reverend Dale T. Grandfield
January 7, 2018

Genesis 1:1-15
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

A minor noble - in one of the second season episodes of Netflix’s “The Crown” - who had openly critiqued the Queen’s antiquated and elitist tendencies in the newspapers is called to the palace for a meeting with one of her bureaucrats, and, while waiting in the office, in walks Elizabeth. He explains to why her why he believes the monarchy must recognize that everything has changed in order to survive:

“The age of deference is over,” he says.
Elizabeth responds, “And what is left without deference? Anarchy?”
The gentleman responds: “Equality.”

1  The age of deference is over.

The Church ran in parallel motion when Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council in the early Sixties - not just the Roman Catholic Church, but the church universal. A new age crested with a focus on what it means to be an active Church, a whole Church, a Church of equality that helps its people become Christlike - the equitable community of God’s beloved children everywhere.

And lest we think deference and passivity were only the reality for Roman Catholic Christians, we Episcopalians have had our own tendencies to see the Church as a lofty hierarchy with clergy at the top of the holy pile and the Church itself as a kind of social milieux.

I sat down in a chair among about 15 others on a nice September day in 2013. Up to the front of the room labored a priest who looked like the ideal of the tussled professor: clericals unironed, hair a mess, a kind of furrowed brow that had done a lot of thinking over the years. We were first-day seminarians at the oldest seminary of The Episcopal Church: The General Theological Seminary. We had all been through the many hoops and trials of the early ordination process and there we sat, waiting for orientation. I, for one, felt like I had finally made it. But there he stood, and on the screen he flashed a Power Point slide with the words: “Ordination is demotion.” Imagine that! Demotion. Imagine a professor of law or medicine or worse yet business telling his students they were about to get themselves into a demotion!

And then he went on to say: “You all have come here to get ordained. But we will know the Church has finally gotten it when we lavish as much attention and celebration on baptisms as we do on ordinations.”

1  The Crown, Season 2, Episode 5 “Marionettes”
2  The Rev. Clair McPherson, Ph. D., Professor of Ascetical Theology, The General Seminary
Barbara Brown Taylor, famed Episcopal preacher says, “I don’t know if you ever thought about it this way before, but ordination, like baptism, is the celebration of a demotion. Unlike sorority initiations or Eagle Scout ceremonies, it is a rite in which we step down, not up. It is a ritual in which we are made the servants of all… would any of us answer a classified ad that said, “Menial labor, long hours, high expectations, low pay?”

Baptism, the celebration of a demotion. As if the law partner became a paralegal; the CEO a secretary; the Chair of the department, the research assistant; the surgeon, a receptionist; the the rector, a sexton, all fellow laborers, none above the other:

For look at what God did: God became flesh.

“Into what were you baptized” Paul asks the Ephesians. He asks us: Into what? Do you know what you were baptized into?

Christ. In the Name of the Triune God. And filled with the Holy Spirit. Filled. Knit into the life of Christ’s body the Church. You were: that is what God does in baptism. God does it, not us, we are simply the honored recipients.

Yet, being baptized into Christ we are called to become… like Jesus, the servant, who, perfect man and perfect God deigned to go down to Jordan in solidarity with the people to be washed: there is no more deference for us; no more deference for being Christian; no deference for being Episcopalian; no more of those days when that was a thing, a status symbol, the achievement of membership in a special society where we could count on God and Church to keep our hands clean and our hearts cold and ourselves safe or unchallenged: No more.

We have moved down. We have been set on the path of “downward mobility”, to quote Rich - downward mobility toward complete equality; we are now the servants, the food-preparers, the trash-remover-toilet-plungers, the healers and and wound-binders, the dirty-foot-washers, the heart-aching-crucified-for co-laborers of the world.

Do you know “into what you were baptized?” “Menial labor, long hours, high expectations, low pay…”

That is what God calls us to and empowers us for when we come up out of the waters: this is my child, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased. Through Baptism you are God’s beloved child, and God’s agent, commissioned to be Christlike. So let God work God’s inexplicable equality through you.

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5 Barbara Brown Taylor, “Buried by Baptism” from *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, in the Teaching Sermons Series
4 Acts 19:3, New Revised Standard Version
5 ibid.
6 Brown Taylor