

Epiphany I

January 11, 2009

There's a wonderful Navaho insult that's well worth noting and remembering. When you want to speak of someone with scorn and with disdain, you say that the person: "Acts like he has no relatives." That's one of the worst thing you can say about somebody—that they act like they have no relatives.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus would have understood this saying perfectly and instantly; and I think it provides a good way into both today's story of the Baptism of Jesus; and the meaning of our own baptism.

Now, the Baptism of Jesus by John is one of the historically most certain events in the New Testament. It's in all four Gospels, and it has been part of the Church's tradition from the very beginning. At the same time, it's also clear that all four Gospels writers are pretty uncomfortable with it. Remember, during the first several years of the Church's life, when the Gospels were being written, there were still lots of followers of John the Baptist around; and there was very real competition between them and the followers of Jesus. So, the early church would have been tickled pink if Jesus—who, remember, was seen as without sin—had *not* been baptized by John the Baptist in a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

But he was, and everybody knew it; and everybody knew that this baptism was how Jesus began his public ministry. So all of the Gospel writers had to tell the story—even though it raised problems about Jesus and John and Jesus and repentance and Jesus and sin and all of that. You can almost hear the Gospel writers muttering "Why in the world would Jesus be baptized by *anybody*—least of all by John the Baptist?" It was sorta like Col. Sanders doing a commercial for McDonald's.

Well, I think the answer to that has to do with Jesus realizing both that he had relatives, and then acting like it.

You see, John the Baptist, like all the prophets before him, did not preach repentance primarily to individuals—to Joe and Sam and Sally and Sue. He preached repentance to Israel, to the community that God had created and loved and called to be his own. Israel had sinned, Israel had abandoned its mission, Israel had forsaken the Lord, and Israel needed to be renewed in order to be prepared for what God was doing. So John preached his call to baptism and repentance to Israel—just like Isaiah and Jeremiah and the rest had done. Sure, in one sense, only individual people could hear and respond; but these individual people knew both that they had relatives, and that they were who they were, first and foremost, because of those relatives, because they were part of Israel. So, they heard and responded—first and foremost, as part of Israel—and only in a secondary sense as individuals distinct from that.

This is, I think, one of the keys to Jesus' decision to be baptized. Standing on the bank of the Jordan river and making choices about his life and his ministry, Jesus almost certainly didn't ask the same sort of questions we ask, and he almost certainly didn't worry about the same sort of things the early church worried about. He wasn't concerned about whether he had done anything that was so bad that he needed to be baptized; nor was he concerned about whether he or John the Baptist was really the top dog in the Messiah-business. Instead, in choosing to be baptized, Jesus was, among other things, saying something like this: He was saying—"I am a part of Israel, a community that desperately needs to repent and to submit to a baptism for forgiveness of sins: for this reason, I repent, and for this reason I submit to this baptism." He was identifying himself with his community, and committing himself to it—warts and all.

And he was also doing something more. By identifying completely with the people of Israel, with the sin and repentance of Israel, and so joining with the baptism of Israel, Jesus also accepted and made his own the *mission* of Israel—the calling of God’s people—a mission to live the life of God, and to reveal to the world the nature of God, the values of God, and the heart of God.

In other words, Jesus’ baptism wasn’t just about him; indeed it wasn’t mainly about him. It was a decision on his part to join himself to his community, and to define his life and his ministry in terms of that community. And this isn’t true only of Jesus, this was a basic part of what John the Baptist was demanding of all of the people who paid attention to him. It’s certainly no coincidence that many of Jesus’ first followers started out as followers of John; they understood that they couldn’t just repent and go home as if nothing had happened. Lots of things had to change—Israel had to change—that was part of what their repentance meant. It wasn’t just for them, it was also for their community and its mission.

Now, this is hard for us. We don’t easily see ourselves this way. Our modern age and culture have little sympathy for such a perspective. It’s automatic for us to assume that we are individuals first, and that anything else begins at a distant second. We pretty much like to think that we have no relatives, or at the most just a very few. So we figure that what we do and what we choose is pretty much about us, and about us alone.

But baptism isn’t like that. Our baptism, like Jesus’, isn’t just about us. Tripp’s baptism today isn’t just about him, nor is Ellis’ catechumenate just about him. And it’s not just about being forgiven, or getting saved, or hearing God say nice things to us.

It certainly is about all of that, no doubt about it; but those things are the beginning, the starting point—not the final and deepest heart of the matter. The heart of the matter of our baptism, like Jesus', is that we have all sorts of relatives.

We are related first to Jesus, as the primary relationship of our lives; but it doesn't stop there—not for us, not for Tripp or Ellis. That's because, through Jesus, we become part of the whole Church, of the mystical communion of all the baptized, in heaven and on earth. And there's more. By virtue of the mission of the Church, we are related, we are bound in love in service, to all of humanity, to everyone with whom we share the image of God, to everyone for whom Christ died.

So, this morning we're all about to get one more relative, and Tripp is about to get a whole bunch more relatives—more than he could ever imagine. And Ellis begins that journey. Those relatives include us, and we promise to take that very seriously. As Tripp is baptized, and as we once again renew our Baptismal Covenant and re-affirm the central commitments of our lives as Christian people, as this happens, we will all, in our own way, join Jesus on the bank of the Jordan river. Listen carefully to what we say, and notice, in the actions we do and in the vows we make, how little of what we promise has to do with just our own lives, with just our own being good, or with just our own personal salvation. Notice how much of it is about having relatives, about being related one to another and with all of God's people—and acting like that.

Jesus walked into that river because he had chosen all of these relationships; and because he was committed to living out, in all of his life, the ministry that came with them. We do the same thing.