

Beneath the Surface

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Sunday, January 13, 2019

Scripture: [Luke 3:15–17, 21–22](#)

Sermon

It is a good thing on a day when we welcome new members and are renewed as the church by their presence with us to remember what on earth we have gotten ourselves into with this Jesus thing.

But let's just get this out of the way first. You are not gonna get thrown in a fire. That's not what John the Baptist is promising of Jesus in this text. You, *whole you*, is not going to get thrown in a fire. That's not what Jesus does. I am sometimes amazed at what things have been attributed to Jesus in these United States of America. It makes me wonder, have we ever met Jesus? Jesus doesn't throw whole anybody into a fire. He doesn't throw tax collectors into a fire. He doesn't throw high priests into a fire. He doesn't throw Roman centurions into a fire. Jesus does not throw people away.

No, Jesus doesn't throw people into fires. If anybody tells you that Jesus is going to throw you in a fire, they must be selling fire insurance, and Jesus isn't selling it, so you shouldn't buy it.

To know what's going on here, you have to know that Jesus and John the Baptist knew something about wheat. Wheat is this plant with a whole long stalk and then head on top in which are lots of kernels of grain and they're surrounded by this papery protective coating that is called chaff.

Now, you don't want chaff in your bread, it gets stuck between your teeth and tastes kinda nasty and it doesn't really chew, and you can't even digest it. So you need to get that chaff off of the wheat.

so what you need is your winnowing fork. which is not too far off from a blueberry rake maybe... and you rough up that wheat to shake off and blow away all the chaff and pick out the sweet, edible, bread of life... wheat.

John the Baptist says that Jesus is coming with his winnowing fork to get at the sweet grain and kernel of who you are. And all that extra junk... well, it's going away. I also think that John is intentional about his metaphor here because the process to get chaff off of the wheat... it's one of those "buckle your seat belts, it's going to be a bumpy ride" kind of things.

So it is for Jesus, and so it ever shall be for his followers. In baptism, we are invited to find our true selves. In the world, we're invited into a ministry amidst injustices and challenges that do not show us that true self gently or softly.

It is a good thing that Jesus, who by any measure of the Spirit did not *need* to be baptized, was, nonetheless.

That's why I love this painting that's on the cover of our bulletins today... I know that I can often fall victim to thinking that Jesus's baptism (and my own) was an entry into some knee high, luke-warm splash pool.

I need the image here that shows me that we might just as well imagine something closer to Thunder Hole: crashing surf and boiling foam running down rocks as even the savior of the world looks small... and the Spirit of God a tiny spot of light. That image, let's face it is just as common an experience of living in community, and standing for justice and compassion as any fun day at a still pool.

If Jesus sets the stage for us by showing us that we should enter this new journey of our faith by being baptized and that will lead us to difficult places. Jesus also sets the stage by showing us that we should begin that journey reminded that we are God's beloved children.

Jesus starts his ministry with God naming him as beloved. He doesn't finish that way... he starts. God's blessing and God's love is not payment for a job well done, it is not some brass ring to be reached for... it is baked in. It is in the core of the grain of wheat that came to be through the blessing of creation and nothing more.

We need that reminder specifically because what awaits beneath the surface of the waters of baptism is not the splash pool, but the churning mystery of turbulent seas of life. If you are going to stand in the storm for justice... you best know that you are beloved and God is with you... first.

I'm re-reading Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*

There are few things more devastating than to have it burned into you that you do not count and that no provisions are made for the literal protection of your person. [1]

There are some things that are worse than death. To deny one's own integrity of personality in the presence of the human challenge is one of those things. [2]

The awareness of being a child of God tends to stabilize the ego and results in a new courage, fearlessness, and power. I have seen it happen again and again. [3]

Today I am thankful for the tender realities that Grace Street Ministry shows us, that there are many ways in which we can experience those trials and challenges that show us who we truly are. We, who may be very privileged to be free of the particular pains of homelessness, poverty, and abandonment by society... need to be invited to remember that privilege does not inoculate us from being in solidarity with those who *do* know those challenges. For their pain is ours, and ours, in its way, is theirs. So as they walk the streets of Portland, I am thankful for the ways in which they connect the challenges of life I know with those of people whose challenges are very different.

We also need ministries like this to show us, and show others, that who we truly are is beloved. In a world that can far too often view people in need with suspicion, or derision, or simply hold them distant, it is a radical reminder of Jesus's ministry into which we have been baptized to offer grace filled compassion. In something as small as a pair of socks, there are a million tiny ways to say *you* are deserving of rest, of warmth, of health, of companionship... of blessing. You don't have to earn those things, they just are: nothing less than the voice of God and the Holy Spirit have proclaimed it to be true. Nothing less than the life and ministry of Jesus have shown it to be true. Nothing less than this life, this church, has called us all to *make it true*.

Who reminds you that you are beloved? Give thanks to God. Who are you being called to remind of their belovedness? Go and do so bravely, even in the storm.

That's what we are about here. We gather ourselves together, so that we each might remember that original belovedness, and remind each other, and then we might, through the practices and prayers of this life draw our consciousness to remember and act for the belovedness of our neighbors on the street. we might remember and act for the belovedness of our fellow citizens who are federal employees struggling to serve while being unpaid, and who are currently waived off as pawns in a game, more than beloved children. We might, God's grace be pleased, go so far to remember and act for the beloved children of every nation... offering aid, food, shelter, and asylum from storms of violence, persecution, corruption, and abuse not because they prove they have earned it, **but because they never have to**, just as it was with us.

Thanks be to God for this community and journey of faith we share, which constantly offers us blessing, and then calls us to go and bless. Amen.

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1. Thurman, Howard. Jesus and the Disinherited (p. 39). Beacon Press. Kindle Edition. [↩](#)
 2. Thurman, Howard. Jesus and the Disinherited (p. 51). Beacon Press. Kindle Edition. [↩](#)
 3. Thurman, Howard. Jesus and the Disinherited (p. 50). Beacon Press. Kindle Edition. [↩](#)