

To begin today, I invite you to go to the church of your choice that has any rendering of the baptism of Jesus. Painting, carving. Years ago, I saw one of the most beautiful renderings of Jesus' baptism that I have ever seen. It was a fresco that hung over the baptismal font of a church in Istanbul, Turkey. It was so peaceful, so serene and meticulously put together; it looked almost perfect. John and Jesus stood along the banks of the river, Jesus standing prayerfully and John pouring water over his head. The Spirit, as a dove, was hovering above. With no one around to interfere and not a cloud to shadow the event, everything seemed perfect. Even John the Baptist appeared unusually well dressed for the event!

Later I saw another painting in a little church in Italy, not as lovely, but perhaps more accurate. It looked more like a trip to the lake on July 4th. The look on Jesus' face was of bewilderment, as if our Lord wasn't sure why he was there; and John the Baptist looked more like John the Baptist. The scene was wild and chaotic, with people all around and mayhem on their faces and repentance on their lips, and it looked to me like someone captured

what the day of Jesus' baptism probably looked like.

Artists are not the only ones to have imagined Jesus' baptism differently. Imagining it differently goes all the way back to the Early Church. There was an ongoing scandal (or difficulty, to say it gently) in the early church concerning the story of the baptism of Jesus. Apparently not everyone liked it. First, many of the early Christians simply couldn't imagine why Jesus himself would have been baptized; we can understand that. That was part of the scandal. The other part had more to do with John the Baptist. If they found it difficult to imagine Jesus either needing or wanting to be baptized, they really couldn't imagine John the Baptist doing the honors. If you ever thought he or his message was a bit overwhelming, you are in good theological company.

Because of these two things, it seems they tried to clean up the story as it was retold through time. It went something like this: Mark, who wrote his gospel first, says Jesus came to John and was baptized. Nothing more, nothing less. Matthew, probably the next gospel writer,

must have found that a bit scandalous. That would have meant that righteous Jesus was baptized for repentance like everyone else, so Matthew adds the detail that John tried to talk our Lord out of it because he didn't need it.

Luke, who came next, dealt with the scandal differently. He only mentions that Jesus was baptized; he never says that it was John the Baptist who did it. Luke introduces John and makes sure that we know who he was, what his message of repentance was about; then he says that Jesus was baptized, but leaves it up to us to decide how.

Finally John (as we heard in the gospel today), his story of Jesus' baptism is unique because it doesn't actually include a baptism. Did you notice that detail missing? John the Baptist says that he didn't know Jesus, just that he recognized him. He saw the Spirit come on him, but that was the extent of his role in the event.

Scholars tell us that in the NT, when this type of thing happens, it means that something is undeniably true. The more embarrassing the detail, the more they would

have wanted to leave it out; so if it is there, spoken softly, like the details of Jesus' baptism, then we know that there was something about it that they didn't like, and that it was absolutely true!

I suspect that what was both true and uncomfortable was that early Christians were never sure how to understand John the Baptist after the time of Jesus. John's rough and tumble call to repentance was different from Jesus' message of self-giving love and of God's kingdom living in us. "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire," John said of the Messiah. "I give you a new commandment," Jesus said, "that you love one another." I suspect that this was difficult for those early Christians in the same way that it is difficult for us and for anyone who has tried to imagine this scene, literally or figuratively, or in trying to understand how the messages of John and Jesus go together; as the Early Church might say of this scandal, why Jesus went to John and waded into those crowded waters and became a part of his splashing ministry of reconciliation and repentance.

At the heart of this “scandal” lies an issue that lives closer to us and our world today and it is this: how do we make sense of Jesus and his message when, in our world, just as in their world, there are rival messages of who God is, what God is like, and what God wants from us. Jesus is named by many, so many claiming that theirs is his message, and that he is on their side, and they name Jesus as the reason why they cannot lay down their weapons and love their neighbors as themselves.

I suspect for many of us Westboro Baptist Church is the greatest symbol of this, proclaiming God’s kingdom of hate and anger. They are known for their vitriolic hate, how they protest soldier’s funerals and blame homosexuals for the world’s problems. Ironically, the Westboro Baptist Church is located just down the street from the Lowmann Methodist Church. Lowmann serves fair trade coffee and reminds people on its website to do justly and love mercy and walk humbly with God. Maybe that contrast is not a bad descriptor of the world in which we live.

Well, if the scandal of Jesus’ baptism dates all the way back to the beginning of Christianity, so does the difficult way in which we must struggle to find love and grace amid the crowded waters of faith. And there is a word for this. It is your takeaway today: *philophrenesis*! Say it with me, *philophrenesis*. It is spelled just like it sounds! It is a Greek work that means loving wisdom. In general, it is a loving way of speaking truth into an otherwise difficult situation.

In Greek, it was also a literary device to describe kind words used in order prepare someone for something uncomfortable. For example: Dear Roger, what a great time we had with you at the Cape. The weather was perfect and the food was amazing. I will treasure it forever. You forgot to pay for your half of the meal. *Loving wisdom. Philophrenesis.*

Dear Amanda, it was wonderful seeing you. Your children are delightful, and it is clear that they get their good looks from you. They broke my rearview mirror

and it cost me \$300 to get it fixed. *Philophrenesis*.

Incidentally, our NT reading today from I Cor is a great lesson in *philophrenesis*. Paul was writing to the church in Corinth to confront them about so many problems that plagued them: arguments about spiritual gifts, speaking in tongues dividing them, dire sexual immorality, denying the resurrection, Gnostic beliefs. His letter seeks to address these things, but spoken with a word of love.

I give thanks to my God always (*philophrenesis*) for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech (read: speaking in tongues) and knowledge (read: gnosis) of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ (read: resurrection) has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift (read: debate about spiritual gifts... in chapter 3 he says he can't even call them spiritual) as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ (read: he will come again). He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless (read: shocking sexual

immorality) on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Loving wisdom. Philophrenesis*.

Well, as I looked at I Cor and remembered Paul's clever work of addressing all that was wrong in Corinth, it occurred to me that maybe that was exactly what Jesus did the day he stepped into the Jordan. There was so much wrong with the world. There was so much wrong with religion. But there where the waters were crowded, not just with people, but with different ideas of God and of faith and of what God wants from us, Jesus went. It was his first holy act of loving wisdom, of *philophrenesis*. That, too, was his true scandal: he was willing to go where we and our faith and lives were, not only to embrace, but also to transform.

And transform them he did. After his baptism, all of the gospel writers agree that everything about the next three years transformed everything with a holy wisdom the likes of which the world had never seen. He liberated the oppressed and questioned archaic views of the One he

called father. He called to task those godly rule followers who had inadvertently set up systems of exclusion and oppression. He proclaimed the unyielding love of God to everyone, especially to those excluded from that beloved, sacred circle. Then when tempted to chose self over everything else, he gave himself up, as if to say that none of this mattered when God was able and about to usher in something wonderfully new.

But he did it in a different way. He didn't set things straight from the beginning. He came among us and taught us the amazing transformation that is possible at the hands of the loving wisdom of God.

We see in the writings of Jesus' followers, how they struggled with both the enormity and levity of the life he brought them. How they would need more doses of *philophrenesis*, of loving wisdom, to step into the rivers of our lives.

To me it takes us back to this simple yet enduring scandal of Jesus. It began of course, not at his baptism,

but as the Word became Flesh, as the loving wisdom of God became a part of humanity in a way that would change it forever. And there was certainly a lot of transformation to be done, yet Jesus didn't seem too concerned with that in our gospel reading today. His beginnings didn't seek to set things straight immediately, but in his own time. I guess he knew that coming among us meant journeying with us. In our gospel, you'll notice how he doesn't actually correct many misconceptions up front. There would be time for that. He just invites people along to journey with him with those words, "come and see." He invites them along to see how his gospel would actually play out, how it would transform them, how that same loving wisdom would come to live in them.

And he offers us that same combination of holy wisdom that leads to grace and transformation. Wisdom spoken in love. "Come and see." With those simple words the holy scandal continues.