

THE BLESSING OF BAPTISM

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
The First Sunday after the Epiphany
January 8, 2017

*And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."
(Matthew 3:17)*

Over the Christmas break my intention was to get out and see more movies than I normally have time to see. Having two teenaged sons, first on the list, of course, was *Rogue One*, the new Star Wars film. It did not disappoint. Next up with Stacie was *Fences*, the screen adaptation of the play by the Pulitzer Prize winning author, the late August Wilson. This is another film well worth seeing. *Fences* is certainly a story about race in America, and the struggles of the black community in the 1950s. But an equally powerful theme that runs through the script is the struggle of the younger generation to receive the blessing of the elder generation. It is about the universal hunger for unconditional love, and how life can go awry for the person whose parents won't or can't give it.

I won't reveal too much if you haven't seen the film or don't know the story. But at the heart of it are three father-son relationships. The lead character, portrayed in the movie by Denzel Washington, is a 53-year old African American man named Troy Maxson. Troy works as a garbage collector in Pittsburgh, and though we never meet Troy's father, we learn that he was a loveless man, all duty and no delight. Troy describes him as "just as evil as he could be," and as "the devil himself." Having never received his father's approval, Troy is incapable of blessing his own sons, both of whom crave his favor. Lyons is a musician and wants Troy to come to the jazz club to hear him play. Troy won't go. Cory is a high school senior, full of promise and possibility. One day he asks Troy, "How come you ain't never liked me?" The question sends Troy into a tirade:

Liked you? Who the hell say I got to like you? What law is there say I got to like you? ...
A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house ... cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you! Let's get this straight right here before it go along any further. I ain't got to like you ... I done give you everything I had to give you. I gave you your life. And liking {you} wasn't part of the bargain.

The words seem to break the reed of Cory's soul. Cory's mother, Rose, hears the whole exchange and later says to Troy, "Everything that boy do ... he do for you. He wants you to say, 'Good job, son.' That's all." But Troy, having never heard the words from his own father, can't speak them to his sons.

Today is the First Sunday after the Epiphany, which is a day on the church's calendar when we observe the baptism of Jesus. In the Gospel reading we have heard Matthew tell of how Jesus came to John for baptism, as did the multitudes from Jerusalem and the surrounding regions. When Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and *the Spirit descending upon him like a dove*. *And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."* Matthew implies that others present also heard the voice from heaven. It's as if God wanted to beam publicly about his Beloved Son, in the way that a proud and loving parent would want to boast about and fuss over a child.

What was the meaning of these revelations? What was the effect of Baptism on Jesus? Nothing about Jesus' nature changed at his baptism; it's not that before he wasn't the Son of God, and afterwards he was. Rather, what changed was simply his own awareness of himself. This was a time of intense awakening for Jesus, when he came to understand fully who he was, and what his calling on earth would be. At the core of his being Jesus came to realize what he'd always possessed: the unqualified, irrevocable, unconditional, highest regard and supreme validation of his heavenly Father, who was willing to express it publicly: "*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*"

Sadly, too many people know nothing of the sort. They are far-more familiar with the experiences of the characters in *Fences* than they are with the experience of Jesus. Because they received no blessing themselves they cannot impart an unconditional blessing to others. In Wilson's play, Troy had been quite a baseball player in his youth – good enough to have thrived in the major leagues if only he'd had the chance. But the color barrier hadn't been broken yet, leaving Troy embittered on the outside of the fence. Now in the 1950s he resents the likes of Jackie Robinson and other pioneering black players, even belittling their talent. Truly, the world is well acquainted with the bitter aftertaste of love withheld.

It doesn't have to be that way. One of those pioneering black players in the 1950s whom Troy would have resented was Willie Mays. Mays was and remains one of the greatest players the sport has ever seen. He could do it all: chase down anything in center field, hit for power, throw with strength and accuracy. But surprisingly, Mays' illustrious, Hall of Fame career fizzled at the start, and almost ended before it really began. In the spring of 1951 he was nineteen years old when the manager of the then New York Giants, Leo Durocher, called him to the majors. In his first 26 appearances at the plate, Mays had just one measly hit, good for an anemic .038 batting average. After his 26th out, Mays was so devastated that he was sobbing in the dugout. Leo Durocher approached him and said, "What's the matter, son?" Mays replied, "Mr. Leo, I can't hit up here; big league pitching is even tougher than I thought it would be." He begged to be benched, or sent back to the minors.

Other managers might have obliged, but not Leo Durocher. Durocher was not known to be a "nice guy," but what he said next changed the course of Mays' career, if not his life. Durocher told Mays, "As long as I'm manager of the Giants, you're my center fielder. If you don't get another hit all season, you'll still be my center fielder. Stop worrying." For Mays it was like being baptized into membership on that team. And the rest of the story, as they say, is history.¹

Today, as we observe the baptism of Jesus, we also renew our own Baptismal Covenant, and at the 11:00 a.m. service we celebrate the baptism of four of our newest members. Baptism has many shades of meaning to it, and you will be glad to know that I understand no one sermon can elaborate on them all. But one thing people have often wondered about is why Jesus came to John for baptism. John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sin. But if Jesus truly is who the church claims him to be, he had no sin and thus no need to be baptized. So why did Jesus submit to John's baptism for the forgiveness of sins? Indeed, the Gospel of Matthew seems especially interested in raising the question.

The answer that makes the most sense to me is that by stepping into the waters of the Jordan, Jesus was stepping deeper into the human condition. Jesus was not washing the flaws of mortal humanity off of himself. Rather, he was embracing them for our sake. St. Paul would later write that *for our sake (God) made him to be sin who knew no sin so that we might become the*

¹ The story about Willie Mays and Leo Durocher is told in Baseball: An Illustrated History, by Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, 1994.

righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). He who is completely aligned with God, completely aligns himself with us. Thus, when we come to Jesus in baptism and the Eucharist, the words God spoke to him become words God speaks to us: “*This is my Son, my Daughter, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased.*” We do baptisms in public because we want the whole world to hear the unqualified, unconditional love of God through Jesus pronounced upon these candidates today, and by virtue of our overhearing, on us.

Through baptism we become members of God’s household. We are given a place at God’s table. Why all this for us? It’s not a reward for successful praying or righteous living. It’s nothing we can earn or deserve. God doesn’t have a duty to take us in. God doesn’t owe us a responsibility. The truth is, God *likes* us. Even more, we are bold to say God *loves* us. God makes us members of his family because of love, and the grace conferred upon us cannot be undone. Baptism, and our subsequent new status under God, is an outward and visible sign of God’s unstoppable love for us. What may rise and fall is our awareness of who and whose we are. But the status God gives us is never lost. You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever. God gives us his blessing, which is the power to become children of God. God gives us the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to live a new life.

The words of Troy crush the spirit of Cory. But the words of Leo Durocher emboldened Willie Mays. The blessing he received unleashed all the potential and power that defined his career. Secure in his status, Mays got two hits the very next day and never looked back. He led the New York Giants to win the National League pennant that year of 1951. In the old Polo Grounds where the Giants used to play, the center field wall was nearly 500 feet from home plate. Mays made catches out there that sports commentators are still marveling at today. One came in his first season, when he raced back to the wall, reached out and grabbed the ball with his bare hand. Another was in the 1954 World Series, when he caught the ball over his head, then simultaneously spun around with a throw that prevented the runner on second from scoring. The play is still known as “the catch.” Willie Mays played “in the zone,” as they say, because of Leo Durocher’s words: “As long as I’m manager of the Giants, you’re my center fielder.”

At his baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus heard the words of God from heaven, “*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*” From there he went on to live “in the zone:” to heal the sick, give sight to the blind, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons, raise the dead, and give the bread for eternal life. “This is my body which is given for you,” says the Lord Jesus to those seated around his table.

In the waters of Baptism, in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, God speaks his blessing to the likes of you and me. My prayer is that you hear these words today, and not just hear them, but receive them at the core of your being, and receive power to become a child of God.

+