

The First Sunday after the Epiphany
1.8.2017
Matthew 3:13-17

Being Brave & Beloved

There's an unpredictability about the work of priest that is often hard to explain to others. One day I'm comforting a grieving family, the other I'm fixing a toilet. Ok, actually I'm never fixing the toilet. Actually, Michele fixed the toilet. However, I did once chase a bird out of the office suite. Ok, Michele did that too, but I helped...Ok, I was there when Michele got a bird out of the office suite. The point is that there is a lot of variety to the work of a priest.

One thing I did recently that is not usually in my wheelhouse is participate in the greening of the nave. As you might know if you were with us for the Christmas season, we didn't so much green the nave, since we didn't pay for expensive greenery, as we decorated with a lot of found and repurposed items. This was done so that we could take the money we didn't spend on greening and donate it to refugees – remembering that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were once refugees and embracing our Advent theme of spending less but giving more.

I was entirely supportive of this effort. However, true confession time: I hate crafts. The idea of going into a *Michael's* gives me the willies. My horror of crafts is not rational, but does relate to my dislike of things that collect dust and provide no practical benefit. When I see homemade garlands and glittery pinecones, or even the amazing Madonna the congregation made from torn up advertisements, I think, "we're going to have to store this somewhere and someone, years from now is going to be desperately searching for something they need and will have to sort through a box of glittery pine cones to get it."

But I found myself, this year, climbing a ladder (I'm about as fond of heights as I am of crafts) and fastening pinecone garlands to our columns. I clung to the columns, glitter getting in my eyes, so that I could make sure there were enough pinecones all the way around. I did this because Lisa Ramish, the parishioner in charge, asked me to. I stepped out of my comfort zone and did something I would never ever do on my own. I had violated my own boundaries, my own sense of what I would do and what my role is because of love; because I love Lisa and what she gives to St. Mark's.

This morning we do one of the more predictable parts of my job, baptisms. Baptisms are pretty much all the same. Babies respond on a spectrum some between extreme horror and extreme indifference. David Deutsch takes a picture where I look delighted and the baby looks miserable. Predictable.

At our baptism this morning, Kelly, an adult is also getting baptized and as we met over the past couple of months to discuss the sacrament, we thought reading the biblical accounts of Jesus' baptism would help us understand what's going on in our baptism. They didn't really, but they did help us realize that Jesus' baptism is not predictable. Jesus' baptism is unique, dramatic. In this baptism, the heavens open and the spirit of God descends on Jesus like a dove, and everyone can hear the voice of God claiming Jesus as God's beloved Son.

God shows up, breaking through cloud and sky, the spirit that moved over the chaos of the waters in creation is seen again moving over the waters of Jordan and the voice of God speaks. That is Epiphany; that is drama.

I'm an Episcopalian, which means I believe in the slow, quiet work of God. God shows up in the everyday kindnesses of one neighbor to another. God is not necessarily flashy. But

Epiphany reminds us that God is sometimes flashy. I don't know about you, but I would like God to do something flashy really any time.

And if we are baptized to be Jesus people we also should be revealing that same God in sometimes flashy, boundary breaking kind of ways.

Or at least we should be talking about it more. I think a lot about church being a safe space and it should be – safe for our children, safe for our bodies, safe for sharing our stories, safe especially for those who are in danger other places. But perhaps we get too caught up in creating and preserving boundaries, here and elsewhere in our lives, and miss opportunities for the flashy, disruptive epiphanies of God.

At the recent Vigil for all Victims of Gun Violence in December the most gripping and horrifying part of the program was when victims of various kinds of gun violence shared their stories. It was moving, gut wrenching, and exhausting. The experience of hearing those stories is still fresh, so maybe that's why a New York Magazine profile from just a couple of weeks following the vigil featuring many of those same stories jumped out at me¹.

The focus of the story was on a project conducted by Narrative4² that brought those strongly in favor of gun rights together with those working to strengthen gun violence prevention laws. So the guests included Francine Wheeler and Carolyn Tuft, who shared their stories of horrific loss to gun violence in this very space just last month, but also Todd Underwood, the man who auctioned off the gun that killed Trayvon Martin, and Michelle Rehwinkel Vasilinda, a woman who sponsored a Florida bill to allow people to arm themselves on school campuses.

¹ <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/12/gun-violence-radical-empathy.html>

² <http://www.narrative4.com/>

The boundary crossing came in the fact that each participant was paired with one with the opposite viewpoint. The pair would spend time sharing their own, individual stories and then would share the other's story, taking on that person's voice. The point of the exercise was to cultivate radical empathy. The result was mixed. Radical empathy is exhausting and its usefulness is open to debate, at least for me. Samaria Rice, the mother of Tamir Rice, a child shot by police 2014 whose killer went free, was paired with a Baltimore police officer. She refused to participate and left the gathering early, leading me to wonder if it wasn't kind of monstrous to ask a grieving mother to be so vulnerable with someone who looked like her child's killer. Other pairings ended in predictable political disagreements. One member of a pair refused to tell the story she was given in the first person, thereby distancing herself from the exercise.

But one pair really worked. Carolyn Tuft, who has visited St. Mark's many times, and Todd Underwood, the seller of George Zimmerman's gun. Carolyn, embodying Todd's story, told of how he was bullied by his father and how a gun made him feel safe. Todd, embodying Carolyn, told of that day at the mall with her daughter, the shooter, her own bullet wounds and then watching the final shot to her daughter's head. "In that moment, the commonality of experience, the universality of human vulnerability, had been so obvious — and so breathtaking. Everyone in the room was separated not by a deep canyon but by a thin line. The dividing factor wasn't really beliefs about gun control; it was about fear and how you respond to it.... No one quite knew where to go from there, but it seemed promising, this collective realization that all of their beliefs were coming from essentially the same human place."

The writer goes on to say that the spell breaks; such radical empathy isn't sustainable. We need our boundaries to keep integrity. But I wonder if our work isn't to do more of this kind of boundary breaking, alternate reality creating activity. Maybe this safe, comfortable world we live in is killing us or at least our spirits. Jesus is baptized and then goes out into the wilderness and maybe we all need a bit more wilderness in our lives, a new frontier that will frighten us but also dazzle us with possibilities.

I don't mean at all to compare my climbing a relatively short ladder and getting pine sap on my hands to anything like what the people who shared their stories did, but perhaps we can start climbing more metaphorical ladders and getting metaphorical sap and glitter all over ourselves. The times demand it. Immigrants are being threatened, swastikas are spray painted on churches, women are being assaulted...it's no time to play it safe.

The connection that Todd and Carolyn develop, as short lived and precarious as it is, is exciting and it feels like the right place to go. However, I'm caught up short by the cruelty of asking Tamir Rice's mother to sympathize with/empathize with a police officer when the wounds of police violence against black children, her black child is so fresh. I'm reminded that we don't go out into the wilderness alone. Even Jesus wasn't alone – the Spirit and the angels were with him. And he had the voice of God still ringing in his head. "You are my beloved; with whom I am well pleased." You are my beloved. If there is to be any boundary crossing, any flash of God breaking through time and space, if we are to step out dangerously into uncharted waters, let us embrace and proclaim that – our belovedness. I am beloved. God is well pleased with me. Say it with me: "I am beloved. God is well pleased with me."The kingdom we are

baptized into is not remotely safe and I shudder to think of where we might be called to go and what we might be called to risk, but we are not alone and we are loved.