

## **Baptism as An Act of Love**

A sermon based upon the article, "Is Love an Art?" by Kathleen O'Dwyer in Issue 85 of "Philosophy Now" Magazine

Today, we are going to talk about baptism as an act of love....Eve approached Adam one afternoon and asked, "Adam, sweetheart, do you love me?" Adam retorted, "Well who else?"

**The Existential Centrality of Love:** Our mission here at St. Luke's is to labor together & with God "to restore all people to unity with God & each other in Christ." An essential element of this work is that of religious reform; to move our own consciousness & that of other Christians toward affirming a different central idea within Christianity tied to a new emphasis upon spiritual practice. I am not advocating a new religion, but the reform & rethinking of our own. We have, for millennia, been reading & interpreting the Judeo-Christian story through a particular theme & set of assumptions. This theme could be described as, "The Problem with Human Sin & the Urgent Need for Atonement." This theme or central principle of the Christian tradition, I propose, has produced countless theological documents, sermons, books and systematic theologies which all share these character traits: a bias toward a literal interpretation of the biblical narrative in which:

- (1) the primary image of God is that of authoritative parent & judge from whom we are separated by our humanity, our sinfulness.
- (2) an assumption that an authoritative parent & judge is capable of loving only those who obey, conform & bend the knee to him.
- (3) the important thing about Jesus is not his life, not his teachings, not his consistent practice of love & compassion, but his death as some sort of transactional payment to our Divine Judge so that we might be spared eternal rejection & condemnation.

Now, if this is what you think or if this is what you have been taught, I can respect that. I was raised to think about Christianity in exactly this way & my current way of thinking is certainly a minority opinion. But while we are all gathered here, I wonder if we could take just a moment to ask ourselves: what has been the impact upon human relationships of seeing God as primarily an authoritative parent & judge? What has been the impact of Christianity teaching that conformity, obedience & a fundamental rejection of one's own humanity are the ways to gain God's acceptance & love upon how Christians treat one another as well as those outside the Christian community? And what have been the results with respect to the peacefulness, unity & harmony of the human community of the Church's consistent bias toward ignoring Jesus' daily practice of acceptance, love & compassion in favor of thinking of him as a sacrifice slaughtered as a divine payment on a Roman cross? Who has benefitted from this sin-focused, fear-based understanding of our tradition & who has lost & suffered? I urge all of us to ponder these questions?

And by contrast, what would a Christianity that makes the faith of Jesus & his daily practice of acceptance & love central & primary - ahead of the problem of human sin & forgiveness - look like? To answer that question, I want us to think about today's Gospel lesson about the baptism of Jesus with an emphasis upon acceptance & love rather than cleansing & remission of sins.

**Two Common Forms of Pseudo-Love:** But first, we need to think a minute about love. What is it & what is it not, that is, what may look like love, but actually be something else entirely? Let's begin with the question of what looks like love, but is something else. Eric Fromm, the famous psychoanalyst of the first half of the 20th century, said that our desire to escape the experience of being alone in the world may be expressed in two different but related forms of pseudo-love or false love. The first is passive dependence. In such a case, one person seeks an identity, his sense of well-being & interior fulfillment through another &, in doing so, renounces his responsibility for himself. He attempts to live through the perceived goodness, attractiveness or

greatness of the other. This kind of pseudo-love, Fromm suggests, can be found in all venues of human relationships: personal, social, national & religious. In all cases, the individual looks outside himself, looks to another for the answers to the problems of living & thus attempts to escape the threat & difficulties that come with human freedom & personal responsibility. Remember the song entitled, "Lookin for Love in All the Wrong Places"? All the wrong places are those outside of one's own conscious, soul & sense of self.

There is a second kind of pseudo-love; a love based upon the need for domination & control. Yet, the controlling partner is usually just as dependent & just as emotionally wounded as the submissive partner. The dominant person feeds upon the submissive other in order to acquire a sense of self-worth, power & fulfillment. The dominant person may feel quite empty, barren, bored & alone inside her skin & seeks a partner who can be dominated as a way of escaping her interior pain & suffering. The dominant-submissive relationship is two sides of the same coin. "Love" is cited as the motivation of both parties based upon the assertion that neither partner can live without the other. In either case, each individual practicing these forms of pseudo-love is attempting to dispel the anxiety & pain of being different, separate & alone by placing one's hope upon someone outside of oneself. Fromm describes such a union as "fusion without integrity."

**Authentic-Mature Love:** So what is love, mature love, healthy love? Paradoxically, authentic healthy love is found only by those who have journeyed to the place of comfort & contentment with being alone in the world. "Mature love," Fromm writes, "is union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality. In true love, the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two. This means that, in mature love, the need for connection is answered through a relatedness which allows us to transcend our separateness without denying us our uniqueness. Real love is motivated by the urge to give & to share rather than by a desire to fulfill one's own needs or to compensate for one's personal inadequacies. Giving is more joyous than receiving, not because it is a deprivation, but because in the act of giving lies the expression of our aliveness, our power, our authenticity.

**The Meaning of Baptism:** How many of us have been baptized? What does your baptism mean to you? Now, what happens if we think of baptism through the lens of healthy, mature love rather than dependent, submissive pseudo-love? What happens if we apply the wisdom shared by Fromm & others to our understanding of Christian baptism? The answer is that it profoundly changes its meaning for us. In closing, let me suggest the following possible changes in how we could think of baptism and the God who is celebrated through it:

- (1) Baptism moves from being about the forgiveness of sins, the cleansing of the soul from corruption & impurity & toward being about a celebration of a choice-full union between two beings; the open, free decision on the part of both God & the person entering into baptism to love & be loved, to commit to & to be committed to, to give oneself fully & to be given fully to by the other.....devoid of any fear, insecurity or desire to escape,

- (2) Baptism moves away from the demand that the some aspects of the humanity of the new Christian be rejected, that one's sense of self be dissolved, & one's weaknesses & faults be abhorred & toward a mutual acceptance & mutual affirmation of all that God is & all that the new Christian is. Put another way, baptism moves away from being understood as a ritualized dissolution of one's identity toward a ritualized celebration of that very same identity. It becomes about a healthy, mature love between God and another human being in which differences are affirmed & celebrated.

I know this sounds like heresy & perhaps it is. And yet, I think it is worthy of our time & energy to ask the question: how would the world be different; what would change in how people think about & treat one another if we all assumed God loves, cherishes & accepts us completely just as we are? AMEN.

