

“Full Immersion”

Sermon: January 13, 2019

Based on Luke 3: 15-22

What does it mean to be a Christian? Of course, there are so many different ways to describe Christian identity. Some would say it has to do a lot with our values and beliefs; if you believe and value certain things, you are a Christian. Others put a higher premium on our actions, how we lead our lives and what we do with our time and our God-given gifts; “practice Christianity,” is their creed - what have you done lately for your neighbor or someone in need? Then there are those who find it much easier to say what a Christian is not (isn't it always easier to say what something is not?); they have a whole litany of things that are incompatible with Christianity (bigotry, hatred, greed, hypocrisy...) and probably also a black list of people who cannot possibly call themselves Christians; some folks wisely point to the Christian identity as being rooted in God's grace and in mystery, impossible to define by mere human categories. I am sure, by now you have come up with your own preferred definition of a Christian. So please allow me to suggest another very simple and very easy definition. This is my definition: to be a Christian means to get yourself wet from head to toe!

Well, which part of my brain came up with that strange definition? O.k., it must be the Sunday of the Baptism of our Lord, that's why I came up with it with the water image. And it will probably take me an entire sermon to explain what I mean by that. And before you go to sleep, let me promise that it's well worth to hear me out. We begin with the obvious: getting wet doesn't sound like a lot of fun, does it? Unless you are a kid running around on a lawn on a warm summer day with water guns or water balloons in your hands and a bunch of fellow perpetrators... that can be great fun, for boys especially! Otherwise, let's just say there is a reason why we invented umbrellas and raincoats. There is a reason why not even my dog likes to go outside when it's raining. It's no fun when your clothes are glued to your skin and water accumulates in your shoes and with every step you take, your feet are squishing in muck. And yet, what is done to us when we get introduced to the church and to the grace of God and to our faith? People splash water on us! People get us wet. And some people are even dunked!

In the old days, in Jesus' days, people would get fully immersed in water, from head to toe. In fact, those who take the Bible literally insist that that's the only way to perform Baptisms even today. They say that our little splashing of water on the heads of babies isn't a real baptism. They are both right and wrong. They are wrong to take the Bible so literally, but they are also right to point out that there is something to the symbol of full immersion. The metaphor at play is this: being a Christian means to get immersed in the grace of God and the goodness intended for your life, totally covered in love, from head to toe. And to that end, the day of our Baptism is a good start, but it doesn't even begin to explain what it really means and what it may lead to. John the Baptist, in the heydays of his water-based ministry said, *"I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."* Meaning, there is more to the reality of becoming God's child than a one-time water ritual and if you want to know what that "more" is, meet this guy who is constantly in God's presence and learn from him, get closer to him. Get your life immersed in the Christ presence. And you ask: how do we do that?

I imagine if I asked that question (how to get closer to this Jesus guy) in our youth and confirmation group, some would say, "By praying... By reading the Bible... By going to church..." And of course, those are always nice answers. But let's be real: sometimes we do those things and we still stay very dry, metaphorically speaking. We don't connect with God's grace, we don't get soaked in God's love, we don't feel it, for whatever reason. Sometimes it's easier for people to get "their feet wet" in ministry first before they can experience the full shower of grace. Help out in some ministry that helps others... Because God's ways are not always logical or linear; sometimes God sends you out into the world to find your true place in the church. Sometimes God sends you through hardship in order to find a new way of experiencing joy. Sometimes an atheist brings you closer to God. Those things have happened.

Christine Eberle, in her book "Finding God in ordinary time," writes about the harrowing experience of cleaning out the apartment of her cousin Susan who had battled a brain tumor and died at the age of 46. She describes the always uncomfortable task of getting rid of someone else's belongings – the little stuff and the big stuff, things that go in the trash, things that get donated, things that somehow will find a new home. It's a dry, often depressing task that nobody looks forward to. She writes that in the middle of this dreary job she came across a fortune cookie that her cousin Susan had left in the corner of a drawer, still hermetically sealed and wrapped. She almost threw it in the trash, but in the spur of the moment decided to open it. It was, after all, her cousin's last fortune. She took out the tiny slip of paper and read, "You can't choose how you will die, but you can choose how you will live." And then she started contemplating the many ways in which her cousin had chosen to live; even in the midst of her treatments and her illness she often acknowledged others. Two months before her death, half blind, she had written a letter thanking everyone who had been helping her. The last line was "I am so lucky!" That's how she finished her message. "I am so lucky!" Now, was she immersed in God's grace or not? Did she choose how to live or not?

Finally, getting immersed in the waters of God's grace may also require the virtue of patience, as described in this experience by a Christian blogger. He says, "As a writer, I love the reality of becoming totally immersed in what I am doing. There is a point for every writer when you get beyond the struggle of getting going, beyond the place of awkward editing, of evaluating your work, to the place of immersion. It is at that point that the writing begins to flow and you feel yourself being written more than writing." Well, I wish I could say that happened to me when I was writing my Annual Report piece, but I get the point. Sometimes you work hard on something until you get into a flow, and all of a sudden it's easy; it comes from somewhere else. And I do think Christian life is like that more often than not. The so-called Christian virtues or fruits of the spirit – gentleness, peace forgiveness, self-control and so on – they don't come to us without some effort. It takes trying and failing and trying again and failing again, and trying again, until you come to a point when Christ is writing your life, a place where you are soaked in his presence, surrounded by his grace. What was shown to us on the day of our Baptism becomes spiritual reality. At least some of the time. And every once in a while, surprisingly and unannounced, unintended, seemingly out of nowhere, we find ourselves fully immersed in his presence and we are being filled with God's love and grace. And maybe in some way we can even hear the voice of God saying to us, "You are my beloved son/daughter."

Amen.