**Matthew 3:13-17—The Baptism of Jesus**

I wonder how many of you recall your own baptisms? Or, those of your children, or partner, or friend? And I wonder, how have you come to understand the invitation inherent in that Holy water and the seal of Holy oil that followed it?

In today’s Gospel we see that although Jesus is divine, even he is baptized. Baptism is the initiation of Jesus’ public ministry. So, too, are our baptisms the initiation, the invitation, the call to our own public ministries. The authority to minister is not reserved for the few who are ordained, but rather, is given to all who are marked as Christ’s own forever, in baptism.

 In my experience, baptism as our “commissioning ceremony” for ministry is something we rarely talk about. Many of us think of baptism simply as welcoming us into the Church and assuring a nurturing environment for spiritual growth. But, it is far more than that. Baptism is where we are anointed for ministry—for servanthood—the root of the word “ministry.” And this is not some sort of far-removed, impersonal, servanthood where we know nothing of the Master we serve and the Master knows nothing of us. This is relational, intimate servanthood.

This is the servanthood Jesus exemplified for us—a servanthood which acknowledges the interconnectedness of all of God’s people. At the core of Jesus’ ministry is the joining of those on the margins. Jesus is found healing every sort of ailment and affliction, each of them conditions that removed their bearers from inside society to distinctly outside. Not only is Jesus found healing these individuals, but, in each case, he is found interacting with them—Jesus asks them what they need, listens…and only THEN provides healing.

In addition to these very personal acts of healing, Jesus’ ministry also involves considerable conflict with the power structures of his day—The Jewish Temple elite and Roman authorities alike—he advocates on behalf of those he has seen *and experienced* at the margins. In his overturning of the tables in the Temple, He acts to deconstruct the oppressive systems of established society.

In our baptisms, we, too, are called to this two-pronged ministry. In our own baptismal liturgy, we vow not only to seek and serve Christ in all persons…… but also to strive for *justice* among all people. In these vows, we are called to a ministry which not only feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and shelters the shelterless, but which seeks to overturn the established structures which create these conditions.

Although this is our call, many of us, and even the modern mainline Church as a whole, have gotten in the habit of serving, but rarely advocating. For me, advocacy work often seems intimidating. The guilt I am moved to by many non-profit campaigns and equally as many sermons seems only to paralyze me.

BIG PAUSE

As a reward for completing all of my recent final exams, I allowed myself a day of catching up with Downton Abbey. Many of you likely know of this PBS series, which depicts the lives of both the servants and the British family they serve living in the fictional Downton Estate during the early 20th century. As those of you who watch Downton know, although there are seemingly iron-clad boundaries between the servants and the family, their interactions are often quite intimate. The servants dress the family, brush their hair, tend to them during childbirth and illness, and in so doing, develop deeply personal relationships with those they serve. They each hear of the blessings and challenges of life on either side of the firmly-drawn class line. As such, the servants come to empathize with the pain of their masters, and similarly, the masters the pain of their servants, so much so, that each, now identifying with the experience of the other, feels *compelled* to advocate on the other’s behalf.

The family, in stark contrast to the mores of the time, comes to love and respect their servants so much as to advocate in court for the footman wrongly accused of murder.

One of the servants, in equally stark contrast to the mores of the time, trusts in the love of the family so much as to boldly ask for their daughter’s hand in marriage, and then to become among the strongest advocates to save Downton from financial collapse, and a significant source of wisdom and effort as they discuss just how to do that.

It becomes unclear just who is serving whom.

It is absolutely not my intention to assert that Downton in a realistic representation of the alienating, dehumanizing nature of servanthood in 20th century England, nor that the boundaried servanthood of Downton is of God. Rather, I think the way in which relationship built on mutual vulnerability enable the Downton characters to cross the deeply etched class lines and take action to upend the oppressive status quo serves as a metaphor for how we, too, might find our way into advocacy work. Downtown Abbey is a reminder that building relationships with those we feel called to serve can transform us from ministering “to” these individuals, to ministering “with” them—from solely performing acts of charity, to feeling *compelled* to put our own selves at risk in the struggle for justice. To “serve” is to do something for another…to “advocate” is to do something on behalf of another—it comes from the latin vocem—“voice”—to be the voice of another...or, rather—to let another be your voice.

BIG PAUSE, then REPEAT.

So wait a minute…I want to make sure this gets through. To advocate is to let another’s experience and another’s needs transform you, such that they become among your own needs. This may seem like a subtle movement, from service to advocacy, but as subtle as it may seem, it has profoundly transformational implications, for each of us individually, and for God’s Kingdom, as a whole. For, in allowing another to be YOUR voice, you are letting yourself be changed.

My brother came out in high school, and before him, gay rights wasn’t really anywhere on my radar screen. I didn’t know anyone who was gay, I was still in high school, and was, as many high schoolers are, completely out of touch with the world outside my own circle of friends and small-town existence. Being gay wasn’t my story. But when Matt came out, our very close relationship, and the deep respect I have for him, invited me into a space where I began to see the world as he was seeing it. I felt his pain, his fear, his sense of feeling trapped in his own, unchangeable reality, as students hurled insults at him, vandalized his car, cornered him in the school parking lot one afternoon and, were it not for a particularly beefy friend of his, intended to beat him. And in this identification with his experience, his voice became mine. I shut down every gay joke I heard, at the risk of my already precarious popularity—I got my circle of friends, three years older than him, to look out for him, too. When I could vote and was finally aware of the rest of the world, I began to advocate in more political ways. And as my ordination process began, I professed God’s deep, abiding love and more importantly, acceptance, of my brother to those who questioned it, a surprising number. My voice, my vision, my desire for what I want from the world, has been changed.

This may already be happening for some of you. Where in your life are you leaving your comfort zone, building relationships with those from whom you differ, and risking allowing their story and their reality to transform yours? Where has someone else’s voice, someone else’s need, someone else’s yearning become yours? Who among you hungers for this experience? How can we, the Church, facilitate opportunities for this, and then support each other in transformation, and process together the changes to our perceptions and convictions we will likely experience as a result?

Carol Hokana, Alex Brough, Chris Anderson, and Michelle Gillig are opening themselves up to just this sort of transformation as they each begin a new component of their baptismal ministries. As many of you know, at the end of February, they will make a pilgrimage to Haiti as part of a medical mission to the rural, impoverished region of Leogane [lay-ah-gahn], approximately 20 miles outside of Port Au Prince, and the epicenter of the devastating 2010 earthquake, the fourth anniversary of which is January 12th---Today. These four individuals will immerse themselves in the surroundings of those to whom they will minister. They are making the sacrifice of time, and family, and work to serve the overwhelming medical needs of this region, where most will have the opportunity for medical care solely during this annual mission trip. In addition, they are risking their own comfort and stability—they are risking feeling overwhelmed, deeply disturbed, hopeless, and helpless. It is by the relationships they will make, in this atmosphere of risk, where they will likely feel these challenging feelings, but will also likely be surprised by moments of joy, laughter, gratitude, and the experience of another’s faith and love--that the seed for action, for advocacy, for allowing another’s voice to become their own, will be planted.

May we claim the ministry into which we have each been anointed, to seek and serve Christ in all persons; to strive for justice over all the earth, and to respect the dignity of every human being. And may we bless Carol, Alex, Chris, and Michelle in their travels and hold them in their vulnerability as they begin this new ministry. And may we, like these four, feel again the wetness on our skin and smell again the fragrance of the oil as we recall our baptismal commissioning, to risk transformation by ministering with and among those we feel called to serve. AMEN.