

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday of Meatfare

Today something wonderful is happening/has happened- another human being- Abigail Turner, daughter of Kyle and Kristin is being baptized/was baptized. A baptism always gives us a kind of focused opportunity to reflect on what baptism means for us Christians. And we do far too little reflecting on what baptism means for us. We easily see ourselves as a Eucharistic people, but we sometimes forget that before we are that, we are a Baptismal people. A famous theologian once said, “we walk through life wet with the waters of baptism”, and we certainly need to remind ourselves of that- that “we walk through life wet with the waters of baptism”.

But what does it mean? What does it mean to be baptized? What difference does it make? What does baptism give us? What does it bring us into? How are we different? Are we different? Now, all the catechism answers to this question certainly tell us something about what baptism does: original sin is washed away, we are joined to the death and resurrection of Christ, we are made members of Jesus’ body the Church, etc. All of that is true, but how does any or all of those ideas *change the way we are right now in this world?* That, it seems to me, is the real question, and unless we Christians somehow get to the heart of that question, baptism will remain what it has been for centuries now in the life of the Church- a door to something really, really important, but which millions of people close shut almost as soon as they walk through it.

To baptize infants means that we- and that “we” includes the parents, the godparents and the Christian community- that we take responsibility for leading that child somewhere. And that “somewhere” is articulated extremely well in the introduction to the Lord’s Prayer found in the Roman rite of baptism (which we will hear when we celebrate the Eucharist):

Dearly beloved, this child has been reborn in baptism. He (she) is now called the child of God, for so indeed he (she) is. In confirmation he (she) will receive the fullness of God's Spirit. In holy communion he (she) will share the banquet of Christ's sacrifice, calling God his (her) Father in the midst of the Church. In the name of this child, in the Spirit of our common sonship, let us pray together in the words our Lord has given us:

Baptism is the door leading to the fullness of God’s Spirit, leading to the banquet of Christ’s sacrifice, and leading that child to be able to stand in the midst of the Church and address God, address the ineffable, indescribable, incomprehensible, completely other *Mystery* as “Father”. It’s this last piece, of being able to call on God as “Father” which I think is so vitally important for our experience of God and of Christian life. And we need to think about what that means and how it effects our lives, or doesn’t effect our lives, as the case may be.

Now I know that there can be various real issues surrounding the language we use to talk about God and to address God. And I know that the sacred scriptures and the Christian tradition are replete with hundreds of names and images of God, and that it’s important for us to recapture those names and images because they all tell us important things about how God relates to this world and to us. God is not only Lord and King and

Warrior. God is also nurse and mother and friend. All of that is certainly true and useful for both piety and theology.

And yet there is something strikingly fundamental in the gospels about the way in which Jesus relates to God- as his “Abba”, his “Father”. And this is the crux of the matter. When we come to the place where we can address God as our “Abba”, our “Father”, we do so precisely because we are related to Jesus, because we’re standing next to him, and he is standing next to us- this is the place where baptism brings us - side-by-side with Jesus of Nazareth, our friend, our brother, the one who opens the door for us to what God is really like.

The obvious problem that countless people have with “Father” language” is the bad or the ambiguous experience that we can have with human fathers- fathers in the home, fathers in the church, fathers in civil society. And then when we turn to God and try to address God as “Father” all those bad experiences of human fatherhood and male power can color and shape how we think about God and approach God.

That’s also why , it seems to me, we really, really need to learn from Jesus what his experience and relationship to the Father was like. And when Jesus tries to get us to understand that experience and relationship, he doesn’t give us a theoretical defense of the fatherhood of God. He tells stories, stories that both subvert and change our perceptions and can lead us towards the *Father* whom Jesus knows. That story or parable about the Two Sons, also known as the Prodigal Son, is one of the most radical

and undermining stories of patriarchal authority in the entire Bible. It subverts the entire image of fathers which people in that culture knew all too well. The father in that parable of Jesus, rather than waiting to be begged to or appeased in some way, hitches his skirts and runs to his wayward and rebellious son while his son is still on his way home. And the father takes hold of him and hugs him and kisses him before the son can say or do anything. This is the kind of divine paternity that Jesus knows.

That's why for Christians when we stand before God, we always stand with Jesus the Son, and we need to keep on reminding ourselves that the sonship of Jesus is a pretty unconventional, radical kind of thing. When you read the gospels, virtually nobody thinks that Jesus is a *good* boy. He goes around healing people (like we heard about in today's gospel), teaching some pretty radical stuff, and then in his home town of Nazareth, he finds only a very luke-warm reception to his work, and in the synagogue when he says some stuff they don't want to hear, they try to take him out of town and throw him over a cliff to kill him (Luke 4: 28). People accused him of being a drunkard and a glutton and of hanging out with some really bad people. His family tries to haul him back home because he's getting into trouble. And then on top of all of that, nearly all the religious authorities think he is just a subversive lawbreaker who is misleading the people, and leading the nation down a very wrong road.

That's the kind of "son" that Jesus is. Most people in his own day would have identified him with the *wayward* son of that parable he told, rather than with the *good* son who stayed behind at the farm. And Jesus would have to wait to be vindicated, to be

welcomed home, by his Father only after he goes the way of the cross. When we stand before the Holy One, before the divine Mystery, and we call out “Abba”, “Father”, we are doing it because we standing next to Jesus- Jesus the troublemaker, Jesus the disturber, Jesus the criticizer, Jesus the healer, Jesus the friend of tax-collectors and prostitutes, Jesus the crucified one, Jesus the one who is no longer dead, Jesus the Judge ., We’re standing next to *him*- “through him, and with him, and in him”

And he’s telling us that our own lives- our lives as sons and daughters of God, our lives wet with the waters of baptism- need to become like his- that what sharing in Jesus’ “sonship” means- we need to be as radical, as unconventional, as disorientating, as merciful and compassionate, and as completely focused on God our Abba and Father, as was Jesus.

You see, what Jesus will be asking of Abigail is what Jesus is asking of all of us- that we be ready to open ourselves up and open ourselves out, ready to allow ourselves to be broken for the life of the world, ready to live like God who sends rain on both the bad and the good, ready to feed the hungry whoever they are, ready to give drink to the thirsty, ready to welcome the stranger, ready to cloth those who have nothing, ready to take care of the sick, ready to visit those who are put away in prisons or any place- ready to live lives of radical hospitality and compassion and mercy. And the only reason we could possibly do this is that we come to know *who we are*-

- sons and daughters of the Most High,
- brothers and sisters of Jesus the Messiah and the Lord,
- the baptized people of God.