

# LOVE THEM WELL, TEACH THEM WELL, AND SET THEM FREE

The Rev. Anne F. C. Richards  
January 9, 2011 - The Baptism of our Lord  
Matthew 3:13-17

Today we see Jesus go to his cousin John's baptism of repentance and the question we often ask – or have been trained to ask – is “If Jesus was completely sinless, why did he need to be baptized for repentance”?

On a certain level, this is one of the most irrelevant questions ever. For John, of course, it was relevant, since he was a prophet and he understood who Jesus really was. But for the people around Jesus, and perhaps even for Jesus himself, the fact of Jesus' sinlessness was not the kind of fact it is for us today.

Jesus did not walk around as a little kid thinking of himself as sinless. And I bet his parents didn't either. Nowhere in the gospels do we hear people commenting on Jesus' sinlessness. They say a lot of other things about him – he's smart, he's crazy, he's kind, he thinks outside the box, we've never met anyone like him – but they don't say he's sinless. Jesus caught people's attention primarily because of what he was saying about God and about how we find God, not primarily because of what he was saying about sin or because he was “perfect.” No one thought he was perfect; far from it. They killed him because they thought he was sin incarnate.

So when our tradition talks about Jesus being “sinless,” we don't just mean that he had some kind of huge store of willpower that enabled him to resist every temptation that came his way. What we mean is that he was so

open to God, so transparent to God, that nothing ever interfered with that. His pull toward God and toward goodness was so strong that it never wavered. No other human being has ever been like him. You and I are distracted from our love of God – by power, by money, by greed, by selfishness. That's what sin is – a turning away from God. But Jesus was always in complete communion with God. He never took his eye off the ball .

All the people who were going to John for his baptism of repentance in the Jordan River were going because they had sinned, and they knew it. They felt guilty and separated from God and the baptism was a way for them to find their way back to God. I think Jesus joined them in baptism not only because he was in complete communion with God, but also because he was always in complete communion with other people, with humanity. He is with us in whatever we undergo, even our guilt, which is good to know.

But Jesus' baptism wasn't just a symbolic act of solidarity. Because just as the people in the story are in process, so is Jesus. It's funny how we think about Jesus sometimes. We think he was born fully formed and fully developed, knowing exactly who he was and what was going to happen to him. Probably not. That kind of life would have been kind of a fake life, right? He lived a life like ours, one day at a time, with questions and gaps and problems and everyday joys and sorrows. He

learned from other people. He searched for what God wanted for him. When Jesus is baptized by John he's 30 years old, the point at which men in his culture were thought to become fully adult. But he doesn't know yet what his vocation will be. And so Jesus goes down in the water not to find his way *back* to God, but to find his way *further into* God, and to what his life's work will be.

As you have heard Bishop Grein say many times, at his baptism, God doesn't tell Jesus what to do. God tells him who he is: His beloved son, with whom He is already well pleased. And Jesus hasn't even done anything yet! These words from God about Jesus being his beloved son might sound like a pious sound bite to the cynical, but this is a major turning point in the relationship between God and us.

Do you see what God is doing here? He is not only reassuring Jesus of His love and of his connectedness to Him, he is also making clear how all of us are connected to God. Whereas before Jesus, the people of God were connected to God externally, through the observance of the law, now they will be connected to God internally, by the Holy Spirit, from the depths of their hearts through a love that exists independently of what they do and reliant only on their desire for God. This is why Jesus says to John when John questions him about why he is being baptized: "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Whereas before, righteousness had been *performed* through the law, now it will be *fulfilled* by the mysterious uniting action of God's love working within the human heart.

In working terms, this means that the starting point for you as a human being is God's love for you as you already are, not your ability to do anything or become anything or accomplish anything. This doesn't mean you just slouch around wallowing in God's love and staring at your belly button. But it does mean that without your knowing and

receiving that love, everything you do or become or accomplish can end up feeling like a whole lot of space junk.

This morning we are baptizing 3 babies. They are really tiny and so I guess you could say that technically they are sinless, just as Jesus was. We're going to say some beautiful words to them: "Open their hearts to your grace and truth...Help them strive for justice and peace among all people...teach them to love others in the power of the spirit...give them inquiring and discerning hearts." These are big words. When we say them, we are not just asking God to make them into good churchgoers and people who obey the rules. We are asking God to help them become free human beings who can accept God's love for them just as they are.

No parent ever thinks they are doing anything else than that. But the fact is that our culture has a sneaky way of trying to change the agenda when it comes to kids. You must have seen that commercial on TV over Christmas...the one for a car. A woman is standing in front of her fireplace, and on the mantel are several very fancy Christmas stockings. She points to one and says respectfully, "Oh no, these aren't for the *children*, these are for the *holidays*."

Sometimes we take our eye off the ball and forget that the most important thing we have to teach our kids is this: "You are my beloved Daughter, you are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." There are other options about what to teach out there, the most attractive one to many parents being this: "Always do well, develop all your gifts, don't be a dope, don't get into trouble, get good grades, keep good company, go to a good school, an Ivy if at all possible, get into a good profession, nothing too edgy. And marry the right person."

I'm not sure we realize how seriously our children take us when we articulate, either

explicitly or implicitly, these very high and specific standards for the so-called good life. I'm not sure we realize how we can make a law of these things. I'm not sure we realize how unbearable the pressure can feel to them, how it can make them hard-edged or cynical or anxious or anorexic or depressed. I'm not sure we hear ourselves when we disparage our children, whether or not in jest, for not conforming to our vision of who they should be. I'm not sure we understand the grief and maybe the shame in the heart of a kid who is not "with the program." I'm not sure we understand that when a kid acts out, he or she is asking us for help. I'm not sure we always remember that our kids belong to God, not to us. I'm not sure that we remember that we need to tell them every day that we love them just because they *are*. Period.

One of the reasons Jesus got into so much trouble was that he said over and over again that faithfulness to God doesn't always look like we think it does. He told the faithful Jews around him that they could obey all the rules they wanted but that if they did not laid hold with their lives on the life that really is life (as St Paul would say), they would not enter the kingdom of heaven. Because they have not listened to the great voice of the Holy, always calling us out of ourselves into the new, which only God can see. The life that really is life.

It's been said that the decision to be a parent is the decision to let your heart walk around outside your body for the rest of your life. All of you who are parents know how true that is. God does, too. Don't forget what Josh reminded us of last Sunday. The only story the Bible tells about Jesus as a child is the story of him getting lost. He's been with his parents in Jerusalem for the Passover and after Mary and Joseph start walking back to Nazareth, they can't find him. Three days later they find him in the temple. And when they ask him what in the world he was thinking to just drop out like that, he says, "Didn't you know I had to be about my Father's

business?" In other words, Jesus says to his parents, the people who love him most on this earth, "I must listen to another voice now." And even though he was listening to the voice of God himself, his parents did not understand, it was so completely out of their vision.

And so Abby and Chris, Carolina and Heath, raising your children as Christians means letting them be like Jesus. Be humble in the face of what you have created. Let them listen to another voice, even if you can't hear it. Let them follow it. Let them even get lost listening to it. Let them find their own way in the hand of our faithful God who orders all things in heaven and on earth. It may break your heart – but then again, Jesus broke his parents' hearts too, when he gave himself into the hands of this wayward world and was baptized with death itself, the death that finally gave real life to the world. Be with your children as God was with Jesus: Love them well, teach them well, and set them free.