

When I was in school, they didn't have telephones. Back then, there was only 1 telephone. It was sequestered at the off-limits office. It was defended by this guard dog with glasses, the same one who protected the permission slips, staplers, and three-pronged adapter plugs. Even if you were a teacher, you had to go through that bouncer to use the telephone. In those days, schools believed that if you let in more telephones some geometry teacher might try to use it without permission, and the whole place would explode into anarchy. Once they got you in school, teacher or student, they didn't want you trying to make contact with the outside world.

Many of my fondest memories of my 2 years in public school involved being sent by the teacher to go look for a three-pronged adapter plug for the filmstrip projector. The teacher would come in on Monday with a suspicious headache, look us over, groan, and say, "Class, today we're going to have a filmstrip on 'Rubber Cultivation in Borneo.'" Curtis Clinkscales would ask, "But isn't this a class in geometry?"

"Shut up, Curtis," she would explain.

She would get the film out of that little tin canister, have us move our desks back, struggle to get the screen hoisted, take the cord to the projector in hand, look at it, and say, "Oh dang. Give me a break. Dunbar, Duncan, Durbin, whatever – go get the adapter plug."

The rest of the class hated me for it.

I'd go down the hall, down the steps, over the principal's office to the guard dog stationed there. "No, you can't use the telephone," she would say before I could ask.

"We need a three-pronged plug," I'd say.

So, I was sent off to Drama, then by the band room, a quick stop at Social Studies, glancing briefly out the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor stairway window. "Look, there are people out there. Driving cars. Walking dogs." It always came as a shock, when you're languishing in school, that there were people running loose outside. 15 gloriously wasted minutes later I gave the news, "No adapter to be found, ma'am."

"Sit down," she ordered. She then did the only thing a creative person in her desperate situation could do. She went to the door of the classroom, looked both ways up and down the hall to be sure the principal was nowhere to be seen, turned her back discreetly to the class – and ripped that third prong off that plug, shoved that plug into the receptacle, and told us that this was our opportunity to know more about "Rubber Cultivation in Borneo" than anybody else in Cambria County. (adapted from "Jesus Goes to School," sermon, Duke University Chapel, Dec 22, 1991)

OK, down to business. Why was Jesus baptized? Not to turn Jesus from a Jew into a Christian. Most of that religious division and struggle would come well after Jesus' ascension. Rather, John baptized Jesus at Jesus' own request as a way of marking Jesus' personal and public acceptance of His mission -- and as a way of identifying who He is and would be, not only to the people around Him but also, in some interior way, to Himself.

Sometimes we associate baptism with the idea of cleansing us from sin so we may enter into church membership in a state of purity, filled with the Holy Spirit. But because Christianity teaches that Jesus was the only sinless person ever to live, that cleansing idea is out of place in the baptism story we just heard.

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It's interesting that in Matthew's version of the baptism story, John says he's not worthy to carry the sandals of the coming Messiah and then says directly to Jesus: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus doesn't explain why He feels called to have John baptize Him. He simply humbles Himself and says, "Let it be so now."

So if Jesus isn't interested in explaining why a sinless man needs baptism, perhaps we should also just let it be so for now and focus our attention elsewhere.

Second, I have always rather liked the gruff robustness of the first rubric for baptism found in a late 4<sup>th</sup>-century church order that directs that the bishop enter the vestibule of the baptistery and say to the catechumens without commentary or apology only 4 words: "Take off your clothes." There is no evidence that the assistants fainted or the catechumens asked what he meant. Catechesis and much prayer and fasting had led them to understand that the language of the passage of the Easter night in Christ from death to life would be the more coarse language of the bathhouse and the tomb – not the polite chatter of the parlor or drawing room. (Gabe Huck, CELEBRATION, March 2016, p. 9, slightly adapted)

What was this all about? The early church baptized its members naked for the first few hundred years. Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386) baptized individuals with these words: "Marvelous! You were naked in the sight of all and not ashamed. Truly you bore the image of the first-formed Adam, who was naked in the garden and not ashamed." Around 400 AD, the Archbishop of Constantinople said, "In this you may know how He enriches your nakedness with His grace." It seemed like nakedness was one of the main points of baptism. Imagine Jesus in His nakedness – yes, we're uncomfortable with Jesus' humanity. People were always crucified naked – as an additional humiliation. But I've never in my life seen a crucifix that would dare to depict it. We're not comfortable with nakedness. But nakedness in the Bible is a symbol of innocence.

Think Adam and Eve. They were naked and unashamed we are told in Genesis. (Gen 2:25) Remember what Adam and Eve do after they have sinned? They cover themselves. They decorate themselves – in order to hide. Baptism tells us we need to think seriously about our decorations. Meaning, if we need to decorate ourselves to fit in with others, do we ever truly belong? Think about American culture – how easily we are judged whether we are in or out of fashion, what car we drive, what clothes we wear, where we live, how much education we have. Baptism reminds us that our worthiness isn't based on our decorations. It has nothing to do with the way we look or don't look, what we can or can't do, our successes or failures, even our talents or inabilities. We are reminded that we are known and loved even with all of our diverse quirks and eccentricities.

If we are unable to accept the differences within ourselves, how are we able to truly accept the differences in others? What if the real challenge of diversity comes in being able to receive love in the parts of ourselves that are embarrassingly different? What if diversity helps us with the most difficult truth about ourselves – that we are actually loved? Can we trust that God loves the strangest parts of us AND of everyone we ever meet? Our journey into a life of rich diversity is supposed to begin in the naked waters of baptism. (adapted from ONEING, AN ALTERNATIVE ORTHODOXY – UNITY AND DIVERSITY, Center for Action and Contemplation, 2018, vol 6, #2, p. 59-60)

Third, everybody has a script. We have a script that we live by. It's in our brain and we live our lives both consciously and unconsciously guided by that script. This script is the product of a lifetime of influences. Part of the script comes from the rituals in which our families engage. For some of us this may be as simple as, "My dad always said...."

Writer James P. Lenfesty tells about an 11-year-old boy fishing one night with his father. Suddenly the boy's pole doubled over. He knew something huge was on the other end. With much effort he reeled it in. It was the largest bass he had ever seen. His father watched proudly, but then looked at his watch. It was 10:00 pm – 2 hours before the bass season opened. "You'll have to put it back, son," the father said. The boy couldn't believe what his father was saying. No one was around. No one would know. Why should he throw it back in? That was 34 years ago. Today, the boy is a successful architect in New York City. He still lives by the ethic his father taught him that night. That is part of his script. Part of the script comes from our family.

Part of the script comes from our surrounding culture, especially television and advertising. We are told that the average American is bombarded by up to 3000 ads PER DAY! These ads may be as vapid as, "You only go around once in life," or "Because I'm worth it!" or "Just do it!" With enough repetition, these messages become part of us.

Central to our cultural script is the assumption that happiness comes in a product or in a service or purchase or a bottle. According to this script, there is a product or a treatment or a process or purchase to counteract every ache and pain and discomfort and trouble, so that life may be lived without inconvenience.

But here's the problem, baptism tells us. This script has failed. It promised to make us safe and happy and fulfilled. Yet, the truth is, it has instead produced new depths of insecurity and new waves of unhappiness. Every survey tells us that we are wealthier than we've ever been – our houses are bigger – we have more discretionary income, we live more comfortably than any previous generation on earth – and yet never have we been unhappier and more uncertain about our future. The script has failed. Never have we been more disconnected from the things that really matter.

Dr. John Killinger tells about a cartoon in which a family is setting up camp in the woods. They have brought their TV set, camera phones, video games, and a box full of other electronic devices. "It's a good thing we've got all this stuff," one of the kids is saying, "or we couldn't shut out the noise of that stream and the waterfall!"

It's part of the script. Technology will make us happier. We're one new gadget away from Nirvana. Meanwhile, many families are in shambles. Sales of antidepressants are soaring. People are suffering from all kinds of emotional disorders and addictions. The script has failed. The sooner we admit this, the better off we will be.

There's something wrong, something rotten in our society.

Our physical, mental, moral and spiritual health depend on disengaging from and relinquishing the failed script. If the script has failed us, we need to disengage ourselves from it. Easier said than done. How do we undo a lifetime of programming from our family, from our society, from all the myriad influences that have been brought to bear on us? That is the task that comes with baptism. It is the task of being part of the church. To detach us from that false, failed, script. It's supposed to be my job each week. Not to entertain, not to reinforce prejudices, but to give an alternative script that is rooted in the Bible and enacted through the life of Jesus Christ and the tradition of the Catholic church.

If you come to church to simply have reinforced what you already know, what profit is there in that? My job is to point out to all of us – me included – that we have all been brainwashed in such a way that we may have missed God's purpose for our lives. My job is to suggest that you and I may be living our lives according to a failed script.

To tell the truth, I'd much rather entertain you. I'd rather reinforce American ways of thinking. I'd like you to like me. And I also remember what happened to Jesus when He sought to change the script for the world in which He lived. They crucified Him. That's not likely to happen to me. But I need you to pray that I will not give in to the temptation of taking the safe, easy way. Pray that I will interpret the scripture faithfully and speak the word that God means for me to speak.

I don't like reminding us that the American script currently casts aside the words on the base of the statue of liberty about welcoming the poor and tired masses yearning to be free – and that script has us building a wall to keep them all out. The gospel script says that these are our brothers and sisters. No arguing that. And we can't hide behind unjust laws about that. Any more than we can say abortion is ok because it IS lawful in the United States.

I don't like reminding us that our personal property is not ours to use however we see fit – for more and more goodies for ourselves – and that we have an obligation to tithe 10% so that AT LEAST 10% of our heart belongs to God, and that our money is meant to help those less fortunate. The American script is more is better. And that script I remind you, once again, is a lie.

Baptism is a bold counteract. In baptism we claim a new set of values. This is fundamental. Critical. The purpose of baptism is to set us free from the script that has failed us. Having this new script in hand offers us endless new possibilities.

What are these new possibilities? So if someone tempts you, 'Why don't you stay the night?' you can say, 'Oh, I couldn't possibly.' 'Why not?' they ask. 'Baptized!' you reply. 'Ohhh...'

You may feel like just giving up on God and religion, like no one cares about you and nothing really makes a difference anyway. 'Why do you keep dragging yourself to church,' someone may ask. 'Baptized!' 'Ohhh....'

This is baptism as it is meant to be. Many of us may need to ask the question whether our baptism means anything in our lives. It should be a powerful force in making choices both large and small. It should be a powerful force in reminding us of who we are and to Whom we belong. It is said that when Martin Luther was despairing, and seemed to be overwhelmed with the challenges he faced, he would touch his forehead and say "Baptizatus sum," or "I have been baptized."

Baptism is meant to separate us from our old life. It ought to separate us from the decay in our society. It is a call to our original innocence, our nakedness before we were ashamed.

We have a new script. We have been baptized! We are beloved sons and daughters! We don't need a bunch of stuff to prove our worth! We are already loved! Thanks be to God! Amen. (Last part adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Jan-Mar 2009, p. 14-18)