

Father Smith had been having trouble with his congregation. It seemed they could agree upon nothing, and controversy filled the air until Sunday itself became an area of conflict, and unhappiness filled the church. (We've never heard of anything like this in our parish, have we?!)

The head of the Parish Council said, "Father, this cannot continue. Come, there must be a meeting, and we must settle all areas of dispute once and for all." "Agreed," said Father Smith.

At the appointed time, therefore, the pastor, the President and the 10 members of the parish council met in the conference room of the church, sitting around a great long conference table. One by one the issues were dealt with and on each issue, it became more and more apparent that the pastor was a lonely voice in the wilderness.

The head of the Parish Council said, "Come, Father, enough of this. Let us vote and allow the majority to rule." He passed out slips of paper, and each one made their mark. The slips were collected, and the chair said, "You may examine them, Father. It is 11 to 1 against you. We have the majority."

Whereupon Father Smith rose to his feet in offended majesty. "So," he said, "you now think because of the vote that you are right, and I am wrong. Well, that is not so. I stand here" – and he raised his arms impressively – "and call upon the Holy Spirit to give us a sign that I am right, and you are wrong."

And as he said so, there came a frightful crack of thunder and a brilliant flash of lightning that struck the conference table and cracked it in two. The room was filled with smoke and fumes, and the entire council was hurled to the floor.

Through the carnage, the pastor remained erect and untouched, his eyes flashing and a grim smile on his face.

Slowly, the Parish Council Chair lifted himself above what was left of the table. His hair was singed, his glasses were hanging from one ear, his clothing was in disarray. He said, "All right, 11 to 2. But we still have the majority."

First, a little background on the gospel. This text is more about John the Baptist than it is about Jesus Christ. What gives? Truth is that JB came before JC. JB was the first to preach the kingdom of God. JB baptized JC, so you'd think that JB was a stronger messianic figure than JC. This was a view shared not only by many Jews at the time, but even as the early church was growing. What JB did was to announce that a decisive change in history was coming – and it was coming through JC. Got that?

OK, let me tease this out a bit. Our first reading from Isaiah prepares us for John's message. Isaiah announces God's intention to visit His people. Through Isaiah, God urges people to get prepared, telling them, "I'm coming, ready or not." John then calls the people to get ready, calling them to be baptized to show that they are changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins, which is an act of worship that indicates a change of heart and mind and way of life. John's baptisms take place at the Jordan River, the boundary, in the Old Testament, to the 'promised land.' What does a person need to do to cross over into the Promised Land? Change their heart and change their life!

John is the forerunner who points toward Jesus as the beginning of God's kingdom. In calling the multitudes to baptism, in urging them to "Look!" the Baptizer is calling them to worship. The beginning of the Christian life, the very shape of the Christian life, is worship, and it begins with baptism. That is why the

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Church asks the parents of those who are being baptized “Do you promise to RAISE YOUR children in the PRACTICE of the faith?” That practice means worship. On this 2nd Sunday in Advent, we need to allow John the Baptizer to call us to worship.

Second, a word on worship. Here we are, engaging in a weird, wonderful activity we call worship. What we’re doing here is strange in the eyes of the world. Here we gather, and I put on very out-of-date attire – my stole was like a necktie worn by Roman men. The chasuble is the remnant of what was once a cloak. They both went out of style centuries ago, but we clergy-types kept wearing them. By the way, do you think this vestment makes me look fat? DON’T ANSWER THAT!

Then we read from an ancient book, written in languages different enough from our own that we often need some help understanding them. And they were written by people who lived in a time and place very different from ours. Here we will engage in activities that we are unlikely to do at any other time of the week – sing songs together, songs that never make it onto the radio. We’ll kneel and bow and stand and sit and listen. And the world asks “What are you doing?” “WORSHIP,” we reply. And the next question asked by our flattened out, hard-and-fast, just the facts ma’am culture asks “What good does that do?” Practical, modern people judge all activity on the basis of its utility. So what we do in church looks like a royal waste of time. It won’t fold into a bed, dice fries, and can’t be listed on E-bay to make money with it. All of which are questions asked by the modern world – what good does it do me?

But this is the same question that could be asked when we see a couple standing there, arms wrapped around one another on a moonlit night, transfixed by one another. They lean toward each other and kiss. What good does that do? It’s terribly unsanitary, and this behavior can lead to.....complications!

Or see a family gathered around a dead tree with lights on it -- in their living room on Christmas morning, tearing into brightly colored packages, children screaming with delight, and all is warm and bright. It’s a very sad person who would say, “Your time could be spent in more productive activity. You should be watching PBS or teaching your children a new skill. Who’s going to clean up this mess? What good is Christmas anyway?” Where would we begin to explain something for which no explanations ought to be needed?

What we do here on weekends only makes sense as a gratuitous, overflowing, uninhibited, act of love. People in love with God act the way we’re acting now.

If we’ve ever been in love with another person (if you haven’t, I’m not a good enough poet to explain it to you), if you have been in love with another person you know; lovers tend to engage in behavior that looks odd to those who’ve never been in love. Lovers are notorious for writing poetry even when they’ve never done it before, or serenading their beloved under a balcony, or dressing up for a concert even when they thought Beethoven was just a movie about a dog, or sit through an entire NFL game even when they are philosophically opposed to football. Love makes them do it. Their behavior can only be explained, if you must have explanations, as gratuitous, spontaneous, acts of love.

They don’t do what they do to get somewhere; they have already arrived. Their singing, kissing, poetry and praise is responsive to the other whom they lovingly adore. Here, right here at Mass, why do we sing, close our eyes and pray, have a tear fall down our cheek – it’s in response to the Beloved ONE who is love and is therefore loved. It’s called WORSHIP.

And when it happens, it’s wonderful. We show up at Mass, maybe not really wanting to be here, maybe not desperate to be with God and yet....something, maybe in the music, or something said by a fellow

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parishioner, or EVEN – ALTHOUGH PRACTICALLY NEVER – something from the homily (NAH!), but the Holy Spirit DOES something, and it's wonderful. We find ourselves "all lost in wonder" at the fact that God loves us and is so intimately concerned about us and our weary world. That's worship.

Third, I've got all this on my mind because of this Sunday's gospel and our preacher John the Baptist, preaching to us from the first verses in the first chapter of what most people believe is the very first Gospel – Mark.

"The beginning of the good news (GOSPEL) about Jesus Christ, God's Son." To begin, Mark (as do all the other Gospels that followed him) allows John the Baptist to begin right up front with the good news. We have a clue from the very first words of this gospel. Mark says "This is the good news of the arrival of Jesus Christ, God's Son." John preached "God is here, now, with us." And what do we need to do to get ready to receive Him? We are simply to allow ourselves to be baptized, to be washed, and 'repent,' turn around. Just for this Sunday, let's say that a Christian is somebody who has turned around, turned around from looking mostly at ourselves, and turned around and looked at Jesus, and fell in love. And so a Christian is somebody who worships, for what is worship than turning away from obsession with ourselves – How am I doing? How do I look? How am I feeling? -- and turning toward God. WORSHIP.

Our worship is a response, a response to being loved. We are moved to worship because we have been encountered by God. When God shows up, whether it's here in a song that moves us or it's in the face of someone who comes to us in a time of great need, we worship. John says, in effect, "Our prayers are answered. God has at last shown up to us, become present to us. Let's worship!"

Christianity is not some new and useful philosophy of life. The Christian faith is not faith in some knock down, sure fire principles that can make our life go better. Christian faith is faith in Jesus that if what John said about Jesus is true, then there's nothing left for us to do but to worship. We worship because God is with us. God refused to be relegated to an idea, an abstraction, or a memory. God is personally present with us.

And that's good news indeed. You didn't come here today just to hear me elucidate three points about God. You came here today hoping to meet and to be met by God. We don't need more good ideas; we need presence. We need to know that God is here, pro nobis, for us. And John says that's just what we get in Jesus. That's the beginning, and the end too, of good news, the best news of all. God with us. And so we worship. Amen. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Oct-Dec 2023, p. 33-35)