

Immersed in Grace



Genesis 1:1-5
 Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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 Russell Eidmann-Hicks

John the Baptist's huge hands pushed Jesus down into the swift, crystal waves of the Jordan river. The frigid water shocked his skin and swirled around his shoulders, his neck, his head, until he was completely immersed, and he entered a dark watery world. For a moment with liquid covering his nose and mouth, terror gripped his heart, as though this was chaos and death. But then in another flash, Jesus let go and opened his heart to the presence of Abba, his God and Father. The water rinsed off his past, his sins and regrets, like flecks of mud off a turtle's back. God's spirit shone even at the river's bottom, and entered his heart. He was a new creation, a new universe, just as God created the world out of deep waters. He gave himself entirely, whole-heartedly to God's loving will. Jesus burst out of the water, back into the light. A dove descended out of the heavens and enter into him. Enormous relief and assurance enfolded him with the words resounding in his ears, "You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased." Jesus emerged and moved directly into his ministry of healing, teaching, and preaching the Good News – creating the community of God's people.

Baptism is about being immersed in the waters of God's grace. The holy water of baptism is cleansing bathwater – meant to wash us free of evil and sin and to renew our

souls. Early baptismal rituals had the newly baptized person receiving a lit candle as a sign of God's radiance, and a new white robe as a sign of transformation. Baptism expresses God's delight in us. God embraces us as luminous souls, with whom God is well pleased. We receive a promise God has for each of us: integrity, wholeness, compassion, in obedience to the Way of peace and loving-kindness. It is completely immersing ourselves in God's love.

For the past twelve years, Martha and I have gone to a conference center in upstate New York called the Chautauqua Institution. Some of you probably know it. It began 150 years ago as a church retreat center that taught Sunday School teachers – and evolved into a multi-denominational and interfaith center for education, recreation, and the arts. Each week they have a chaplain who leads morning worship – and several times we have been blessed to be able to be ministered to by Fr. Gregory Boyle from Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. That city is now on fire, but certain neighborhoods have burned for decades with poverty, inequality, addiction and violence. And just as we now pray for each one of God's beloved children displaced, wounded or killed in these fires, so Father Boyle has welcomed and cared for each gang member who walks through the doors of Homeboy Industries, seeking a new life.

Fr. Boyle served as a priest in one of the toughest neighborhoods in the city, filled with fierce gangs that terrorized neighborhoods. Fr. Boyle – known as "G" – got to know the families he ministered to – and saw the heartbreak of victims, parents and relatives of these gang members. He started Homeboy Industries first as a bakery to employ former gang members – and later started businesses to recycle electronics, a café, a printing business, catering, grocery, farmer's market and more. He called it an off-ramp for those stuck in cycles of violence. The police and social workers saw gang members as dangerous felons who needed to be locked up. Fr. Boyle saw them as children of God in need of love and respect – looking for a way to find a path back to goodness and their true selves. It is very similar to Integrity House in Newark started by our own Dave Kerr. Understanding and acceptance go a long way to changing hearts – as Jesus discovered and taught centuries before – looking beyond stigma with love.

Fr. Boyle describes it this way in his book Forgive Everyone Everything: *"Gangs are bastions of conditional love – one false move and you find yourself outside. Sights are remembered, errors in judgment held against you forever. If a homie doesn't step up to the plate, perform the required duty, he can be relegated to 'no good' status. This is a state from which it is hard to recover. Homeboy Industries seeks to be a community of unconditional love. Community will always trump gang any day."*

Our place at Homeboy is this touchstone of resilience. You discover your true self in this 'nation.' Homies who used to work at Homeboy always return on their days off or on their lunch break. A homie said to me once, "I just came by to get my fix." "Of what?" I ask him. "Love," he says.

Baptism is, for us Christians, the ultimate expression of who we are and how we are loved by God. It is the foundation of our identity. It is what we are meant to be: immersed in God's love, not just once when we are babies, but continuously throughout our lives. As Henri Nouwen writes, baptism is when God claims us as God's beloved, as God's delight, as the vibrant, beautiful, whole, healthy soul God created at the beginning. We are God's Beloved.

As Fr. Nouwen writes: *"I hear at my center words that say: 'I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step.*

"Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. You belong to me. I am your father, mother, your brother, your sister, your lover, your spouse....yes, even your child...wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one." P. 31

This is what baptism is meant to offer to us – to return to our true selves, to see ourselves as God sees us, as a radiant soul, as one whom God loves like a parent - without reservation. This is the water that we dip ourselves into in baptism. This is the medicine Fr. Boyle offers to gang members on the streets of LA. He quotes the poet Hafiz: *"Try to look upon yourself more as God does. For He knows your true royal nature. God is never confused and can only see Himself in you."* At the center of our being we are cherished and held and honored by God – even if society rejects us.

But this is so hard to take in. Because we are so controlled by how others treat us, we get caught up in negative thinking and self-rejection. Self-rejection is not only our thoughts of low-self-esteem. Self-rejection, according to Nouwen, is all those things that reduce us to an identity that is beneath us and belittles our one great true identity as Children of God. Nouwen writes: *"Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the 'Beloved.' Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence."* P. 28

Religious faith is an alternative to what our society tells us – what we hear in the marketplace or the shop or on the media – that we are only valued for our money, our usefulness, our fame, our looks. Faith is about becoming immersed in what is life-giving, what creates a peaceful soul, healthy communities, strong families, honest friendships. Faith reminds us who we really are. If we can immerse ourselves in the will of God, and walk in God's ways, then our lives take on the radiance and fullness and light of the presence of God. Jesus was clear that violence and rejection are not the way to bring about healing and transformation – it is love. It is about offering to go the extra mile, giving when people ask, loving not only friends but even enemies. When people trust a person – like Fr. Boyle – like Dave Kerr - who really means it and really loves them – then change happens – hearts open – a path to wholeness appears.

This is what baptism represents for us – being immersed in God's love- being cleansed of hate and rejections – and to be re-born into a new life. This happens day after day in places – like this church, like rehab centers, like communities of caring – where one's true self is recognized and embraced.

Fr. Boyle tells this story:

I have baptized all of Horacio's kids, and today its number five. I watch Horacio masterfully corral everybody, the kids, the suegra (mother-in-law), and his siblings, and deftly bring the proceedings to order. He's a pro. A scrappy gang member with overly pronounced ears – he's so skinny it makes you wonder how he managed to defend himself on the streets. (Trust me, he managed.) Once I saw him and his kid brother, many years ago, in the middle of the day walking in the projects. I asked Horacio if he had ditched school that day. He was insulted. "Noooo," he said, "we didn't ditch school – we just didn't go." My apologies. A Navigator at Homeboy aptly said of Horacio, "He is a mansion. He has many rooms." Horacio is an incandescent soul.

As grace tends to do, while winding down the baptism, I am filled with the utter fullness of Horacio's bright goodness. I recall Mary Oliver's words: "That you have a soul – your own, no one else's – that I wonder about more than I wonder about my own. So that I find my soul clapping its hands for yours more than my own." Indeed, Horacio is the whole accomplishment, and my soul is clapping its hands.

While folks are taking post-baptismal photographs, I call him aside. I'm brimming with such love for this kid with whom I've logged many years of memories and heartaches.

"You know what I was thinking about during the baptism?"

"That I gotta stop having kids?"

"Nooo...I was just thinking...how thoroughly good you are and what a beautiful job you've done with your life. Serio."

And both our eyes got flooded when we allowed the soul to quicken at hearing what it didn't know it already knew."

Let's honor the light of our baptism by immersing ourselves in the loving presence of God – day by day. Let's let ourselves be transformed by that love. Let's remind ourselves that we are God's Beloved, and that others around us are too. We each have within us the light of Christ. We shine with the radiance of God's creation. We are children of light, children of hope, children of God who is well pleased, very well pleased, with each of us. Amen.