Baptism to Larger Thinking

Baptism of Jesus, Epiphany 1

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Matthew 3: 13-17 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Acts 10: 34-43

In the movie [Avatar: The Way of Water](https://filmcolossus.com/movie-explanations/avatar-2-water/themes), we hear the understanding of the Metkayina Na’vi, the people who live by, in, and are connected to the water and its creatures.

*The way of water has no beginning and no end. The sea is around you and in you. The sea is your home, before your birth and after your death. Our hearts beat in the womb of the world. Our breath burns in the shadows of the deep. The sea gives and the sea takes. Water connects all things. Life to death. Darkness to light.*

This wisdom emphasises the interconnectedness of water and all things. It celebrates the sacredness of life and water, and acknowledges life and death as a part of that interconnectedness.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus is baptised in an act that recognizes the sacredness of water, which evolved into our sacrament of baptism. John the Baptist was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, so knowing who Jesus was, he didn’t think Jesus needed to be baptised. However, Jesus convinced him it was important ‘to fulfill all righteousness’. Righteousness is understood to be what God wants that is right and good. Jesus also knew it was important as an act to show the people that he was human with them and would go through the same as them. They then experienced his divinity in the proclamation from heaven: “this is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased”

It is important to note that repentance, which is metanoia in the Greek, has been misunderstood as changing behaviour or feeling sorry for doing bad things, for sin. It actually means, go beyond the mind, or go into the larger mind. It is about a new understanding, being open as contemplative theologian Cynthia Bourgeault writes to “reaching beyond black-and-white dualities, into the larger heart and mind of God.” Repentance needs to open us up to new understandings and new ways of seeing. There is a physical symbol of this opening in this story with the heavens opening up and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove upon Jesus. But what had to happen before this, was for John to have a new understanding. John the Baptist had to let go of his old way of thinking (that Jesus should baptise him) to a new understanding that he must baptize Jesus. When have you had times or experiences of conversion to this ‘larger mind’ type of thinking? It moves from either/or dualisms, to both/and dialectic thinking. At one point I used to think that we should not be involved in charity, because we needed to be working for justice, so the charity isn’t needed. I now understand that we need charity, to feed people who are hungry for example, while we work to change the systems that keep them hungry.

Thus, Jesus’ baptism is a rite of passage, not to cleanse, but to embody for himself and the world the seemingly upside-down way he will liberate humanity from the prison of sin and small thinking. Through the universal symbol of water, Jesus models his invitation for all to move from unconsciousness to consciousness – a deeper awareness of just how deeply loved we are by a good and gracious God.

This metanoia understanding shifts our understanding of repentance from changing our behaviour first, to changing our way of thinking. To think of baptism as only the forgiveness of our individual sins, keeps us focused on the self-centred self. We can miss the discerning with the liberation theologians that sin is structural and, in the systems, it structures our thinking and theologies. As long as we stay focused on the delusion of the autonomous self and individualism, we miss the baptism that Jesus underwent. A baptism that changes our way of thinking, that embraces the community, which he lived out by caring for, healing and liberating the poor, the marginalized, the outcast.

This was evident to me when Brian and I were having a conversation with one of our new Afghan friends, Fahim. We were talking about adjusting to life in Canada and the difficulty he was having with the isolation we have in our society. He talked about how important family and community was in their culture, in that they lived together, many people in one home, and supported one another in their day to day life. They knew their neighbours and would get together with them, support and be supported by them. He lamented having only three others to live with in his home and that he doesn’t know his neighbours. We all acknowledged the problem of individualism in our western society and the importance of having a community focus and that we have much to learn from other cultures, including indigenous cultures about what it means to be and live in community. We acknowledged that being part of a church community can be a part of countering this individualism and is one of the few places where intergenerational interactions occur.

In our second reading of Acts, Peter experienced a metanoia, a new way of thinking, a widening of his mind, when he realizes that God shows no partiality, that the gospel is for all, including the Gentiles. Where he says in verse 34 ‘I understand’, it is more accurately translated as ‘I am gaining understanding’. It is a radical shift in thinking from their previous understanding that all nations, was all Jewish nations, which did include the Samaritans. However, Peter now realizes that all nations literally means all nations, everybody. No ethnicity, race, culture is to be excluded from God’s love. This is an important message for us today as we face the challenges of racism and white supremacy. When we talk about addressing systemic or structural sin, racism is a prime example, as it is embedded in our policies, systems, and structures, including the church, our theologies, our hymns, our doctrines. It means being willing to confront our fears as Peter did and envision a new community based on new criteria. It will require us of the dominant culture, to go out of our comfort zones and enter into the spaces of the Black, indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC folk) on their terms and ultimately give up some of our space and power to BIPOC folk. It will require those of us in the dominant culture to be honest about our perceptions of BIPOC folk, our fears about welcoming them fully into our spaces, and being open to learn and unlearn to move toward a new understanding, a larger mind.

In Avatar, The Way of Water, the family who had come to the water community from the forest had to open themselves up to learning a new way of being, a new way of understanding, though it was not much different from their previous ways, but the practice of life was very different. When faced with life threatening situations and crisis, in the end, it was the children who helped the parents use their new understandings to get them out of the crisis and life-threatening situations. Their understanding of the interconnectedness of the water with all things, helped them through and survive the challenges they faced.

May we embrace our baptism and our faith, which calls us to a repentance that will lead us to a larger mind, deepening our understanding away from dualisms to collective community and interconnectedness. May we work toward being community that challenges individualism and truly loves our neighbours. May we embrace the radical welcome of God, that Peter was beginning to understand, that all truly means all.