

Sermon for 1 Epiphany A
St. John's, Gloucester
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Time warp—two days ago, we celebrated Epiphany. Jesus was a toddler. Today, he's 30 years old and getting baptized by John. How the time flies!

John, Jesus' cousin, was specially chosen by God to be the warm-up act for Jesus. His act included baptizing people in the Jordan River. We hear about this every year and may miss that he was doing something new, radical. Jews performed baptisms, so that was not new. But baptisms were a ritual that was done for Gentiles, non-Jews, as part of their journey to become Jews. If Gentiles wanted to convert to Judaism, they needed to provide a sacrifice, to become circumcised if they were male, and to be baptized. That meant, strip down naked and be fully immersed in water, to represent cleansing and a new relationship to God.

John offered baptism to **Jews**—he was saying that it wasn't just Gentiles who needed to be cleansed. He called them to repentance, to new and better relationship to God after they recognized their own sin. And he was using the Jordan River, which was where the original Hebrew people crossed into the "Promised Land." The Jordan represents a new beginning, a reclaiming of a right relationship with God.

So John, a kind of prophetic wild man, was out in the wilderness calling people to recognize the ways they had gotten separated from God, calling them to turn and reconnect with God. He is preaching to the "good people," for Jews considered themselves chosen and special. He is doing a radical thing. And he is doing it to prepare the people for the message that Jesus will bring and will be. When the religious leaders come out to see what he's doing, he has choice words for them, about how they especially need to get their act together.

And then, Jesus shows up. He wants John, his cousin, to baptize him. And John balks. He says, "Wait a minute. You of all people don't need a baptism for repentance!" Which is correct. Jesus—being God—already has a right relationship with God. But Jesus says, "No. You need to do this. It's important. It fulfills God's will." John accepts that and baptizes Jesus. And the other 2 persons of the Trinity show up—the Holy Spirit comes down and God's voice is heard: "This is my beloved Son, who pleases me." That is for the people standing by, in case they missed the significance.

Jesus' ministry starts with baptism for repentance that he doesn't need. Why would he do that? It's not that he personally has sinned—rather, he is showing his identification with us, with humans. We tend to sin and we tend to create sinful societies. That's what we do. And he is fully human, so he wants to show up how fully he "gets" us. He is willing to "be us" to show us the way to God.

We usually think of sin in terms of individuals—what I or you or someone else does or doesn't do. But in our baptismal service, we are asked to renounce three types of evil: cosmic evil—spiritual forces that opposes God—systemic evil—evil powers of the world that destroy creatures of God—and personal evil—sinful desires that draw us away from God.

I believe that in his baptism, Jesus was identifying as a human, and so repenting of the systemic evil that every human being becomes a part of.

I know we all have individual failings, but what I want to explore with you is systemic sin. That is when we are part of corrupt systems that hurt or destroy. We often may be unaware of systemic evil, and in fact think that we are not responsible. But we are still part of the system and often benefit from it.

For instance, have you ever killed someone while driving your car? I hope not. How terrible. But in 2020, 38,824 people died from car crashes and each year, more than 35,000 people die. We, as a society, have decided that that is a tolerable price to pay for being able to drive cars. 30-40 thousand people per year. If that's not acceptable, let me ask you this: when is the last time you were so outraged by a car crash death that you called up your congresspersons and asked them to ban cars? Never, of course. We say, death from car crash? How terrible! But we accept that it is part of life.

In 2018, there was an outbreak of e coli bacteria in Romaine lettuce and everyone stopped eating Romaine lettuce and was really worried. Five people died. Five people dying from lettuce was not acceptable but 35,000 from cars was. Why? We like having cars. We think we have to have them. So we put up with the expense and the deaths. Cars represent a systemic sin—one that cause death, permanent injury, harm to animals, air pollution, and contributes to global warming. I don't like cars and don't own one, but I use cars and I am part of a car-based society. I participate in this systemic sin.

Another example of systemic sin is how white colonists, most of our ancestors, treated Indigenous nations on this land, their land. We accidently and on purpose exposed them to diseases that they had no resistance to. We waged war and efforts to commit genocide. The US government forced nations to leave their lands and relocate farther west. They made treaties and broke them, repeatedly. They waged campaigns to erase Indigenous languages, customs, and dress and ripped children from families to "reeducate them" into White man ways. All this to steal their land and make it into private property, a concept foreign to native nations. And we have benefitted by the homes and buildings and land we own, the national and state parks we enjoy. Indigenous nations, displaced, lied to, robbed, neglected, abused for hundreds of years—have high rates of mental and physical health problems, suicide, substance abuse. At the same time, we have so misused the land and resources that we took--the ones that they stewarded with care over generations--that the earth is careening towards global warming disaster. Even now, our leaders refuse to place indigenous world-views at the center of measures to address climate change, trusting instead in the same white culture to solve what we messed up. (Read [As Long As Grass Grows](#) by Dina Gilio-Whataker). We are all part of this system which has been disastrous for all of us.

We are invited to repent, not only of the stuff we do as individuals, but of the ways we are part of systemic evil. The purpose of repentance is not really to feel guilty. IT's not to make us feel terrible and go around with our tails between our legs. The purpose is to acknowledge our sin, that which stands between us and God, so that we can turn and reestablish right relationship to God. And being in relationship with God, we can be empowered to address the systemic evils that we are part of.

Jesus was baptized to start his ministry, showing that he was one with one. The difference between usual Jewish baptism and this baptism is that here the Holy Spirit came down on him, revealing that God was with him. He was empowered to speak of God, to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, to speak up against injustice. That is the same Holy Spirit that we receive in our baptism.

What are we to do about systemic evil? We repent that we are part of a society that causes pain and suffering. We acknowledge that we are part of the problem. We receive the power of the Holy Spirit to bear the truth and be guided into right action. We learn to pay attention to how our society runs, how we participate in it. We become mindful. We learn about our country's real history and racism. We build up our ability to live with awful truth and to work for change. We advocate for all voices to be heard about decisions that affect us all, especially about justice and climate change. We do random acts of beauty and kindness. We protest. We pay attention to candidates who are willing to pass laws to address climate change, racism, economic inequity. We can't change the whole system, but we can do our part to change the system. We can pray for God to show us how and to change hearts and minds. The Holy Spirit allows us to do this work together, as a community.

We get to repent every week in the confession of sins. This is healing medicine. Jesus took it on our behalf. We'll never not need it, and it is always there for us. Let us pray.
Amen.