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Matthew 3:13-17

### READY FOR THE REVOLUTION

As you have no doubt heard by now, a publishing company called, ironically enough, New South Books has delivered a new edition of Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn". But it hasn't been made new by adding anything, but rather by taking away the over 200 times the novel uses the "N" word. New South has replaced that word with "slave". Now, this is, of course, a very complicated debate where issues of censorship, artistic integrity, social responsibility and the sanitization of literature get all mixed up. Huckleberry Finn was published in the late 1800s when the "N" word was prevalent and, it could be argued, Twain knew this and used its derogatory sense as satire as he portrayed Jim as the most honorable character, thereby making that term one that would jar his reader when used to refer to the most heroic figure in his novel.

This is, of course, not the first instance of a piece of literature being edited for content. Roald Dahl's famous book Charlie and the Chocolate Factory used to have oompah-loompahs that were African pygmies, but later editions changed their skin color. The Doctor Dolittle books were edited to remove racially stereotypical and offensive language. As our culture, hard as it is to believe sometimes, has grown more culturally sensitive, what is acceptable has changed. That becomes a problem particularly when we read literature from another period in history. We feel the need to sanitize it to more readily fit our own conceptions and biases.

I've read a lot of commentary on this revision of Huck Finn, but what sticks with me is the sense that we need to cover-up our past, or to domesticate dangerous words. The "N" word sticks out like a sore thumb and reminds us of a past we'd like to divorce in some way. The problem is, it is our past. We have no hope of contending with racism if we do not own up to it. Confession is good for the soul, the old Scottish proverb goes, but it is because it allows us to then seek

reconciliation. You cannot have one without the other.

The baptism of Jesus is another thing that I think has been sanitized. Mark and Matthew bear a striking resemblance, but Luke and John take very different stances on this encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus in the River Jordan. Jesus comes to John like any other person seeking baptism as the sign of beginning a new life. He comes knowing that this is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He identified with sinners and did not consider himself perfect in every respect as did the later church, which had such a problem with Jesus needing to repent of anything that they changed the earliest versions of the story to have this be more about a visible sign of Jesus' divine difference rather than a humble story of Jesus' humanity.

Note that in Mark's version, the earliest one, and Matthew's as well, it is only Jesus who sees the dove descending from the heavens and, it is supposed, only he who hears the voice of God. Luke takes the form of an observer and leaves the recipients of the vision of a dove and the voice of God a lot murkier, while John the Baptist specifically becomes the witness to all of this in the 4<sup>th</sup> gospel. So the so-called "signs" of Jesus' mission, purpose and connection to God start out very personal, but that won't do for a church needing Jesus to be the "Son of God". The story has to be revised to reflect some different cultural "tastes".

See, just like the "N" word has different connotations now than it did when Twain used it, the phrase "son of God" in relation to Jesus changed over time. And that's what the baptism hinges on...was it a baptism just like all the other people John called to repentance, or was it a baptism to a new title - the "Son of God"? No maybe that's just semantics. Maybe that kind of theological detail doesn't matter a hill of beans. But I think that there is something very important lodged in this story.

First off, I'd say that titles really do matter. It was a full month after I was ordained that I first used the title "Reverend" before my name in correspondence. And even then I was totally uncomfortable with it. I never referred to myself in this fashion while I was in seminary and tried to dismiss such references to a title for me before my ordination. I distinctly remember an internal wince when I was introduced at my ordination as the Rev. Chris Moore. To this day I remain a bit leery of the title. Why is this? Well, the cynical side of me says it's because I'm not comfortable with authority, but the more positive twist (at least to me) is that I simply don't think of myself as "set aside" in any particular way. But the honest truth is that even when we try and reject such titles, and the responsibilities that go with them, the culture around us doesn't really let us do that.

Even now at family gatherings I don't really want all eyes on me when it comes time to say the prayer. I don't believe that God hears my prayers anymore than God

hears yours. But, I often hear, with you standing there I'm self-conscious...like my prayer won't be good enough. Well, I'm pretty sure that you're not praying to me, I say, so who cares what I think? That answer, by the way, is not very satisfying to people. It's one of the reasons I like being a Congregationalist. Our tradition holds that I am raised up out of this congregation, I am ordained by you to serve you and when I leave then my ordination goes too. That's not quite the way that it works anymore, but the spirit of that is still there and I appreciate that sentiment. What sets me aside, if anything, is my education, not my character. Robin and I do not believe ourselves to be more "holy" than any of you...in fact most of the time, based on the amazing things that we see happen here, quite the opposite. But still, the truth is, that we are set apart. When we wear these robes and stand in this place...when we walk into the hospital room or the family room at the funeral home...when we stand in front of the couple waiting to be joined together we are different.

And that is the point of baptism. In some ways I think that part of the ritual for ordination should be a baptism because you really are taking on a new life in some pretty profound ways. And that's what baptism has always meant - you are dying to one life and being born to a new one. In the ancient days the ritual was more dramatic because almost no one was able to swim. That wasn't a leisure activity in the ancient world - open water like a lake or the sea, was dangerous. It was deadly. So the act of stepping into a pool or moving stream of water and placing your head under it was serious stuff. For many it would have been the first time their head had ever been below water...a very anxious and scary moment that was pretty symbolic of your death and then a raising back into the air and you probably did feel "born again".

Jesus' baptism becomes the confirmation of his messianic role. But what was that role, really? What Jesus tells John when John claims that Jesus should be baptizing him is that this is "proper...to fulfill all righteousness." That's a key word, righteousness. Righteousness in both Hebrew and Greek means integrity, equity or justice. It doesn't mean "self-righteous" or morally upright or free from sin. It means something more like doing the will of God, or being obedient to God. Jesus' baptism is his symbolic form of submission to what he sees as God's mission for him.

In this baptism something dies and something is brought to life. The idea of a sacrificial system in which God is appeased by gifts in order to spare wrath or grant blessing is gone and the theology of relationship is born. It is in these waters that Jesus will drop any last vestige of his perception of God as one who authorizes force, violence, power to dominate. Now God will be "papa" to him, and God's voice signifies that change. This new life is the realization, the change of heart, the turning around that can allow us to know God not as apocalyptic deliverer of power

and might, but the one who heals, the one who binds up our wounds, sets the captives free and brings sight to the blind...even the spiritually blind. That is the baptism that Jesus will go on to live.

What is interesting is that as Jesus lets go of some of his theological weight, it is John, standing right next to him in the water, who will be surprised. John still expects some firepower and his revolution looks a lot like we expect revolutions to look...armies and battles, force and might and the final victory of a conquering force. That is not a baptism of repentance that makes any room for change. And so here we are, living much more the theology of John than the baptism of Jesus. For while we still largely sit around waiting for a second coming of Jesus as King, he announced something very different according to Matthew. "Repent", Jesus says just a few paragraphs after his baptism, "For the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." He quotes from Isaiah saying that "into the shadow of death light has dawned." It doesn't sound like a far off dream to me, Jesus is announcing an arrival.

We have to be careful at how we sanitize our stories. Huck Finn is not the same if we take it out of the context in which it is written, no matter how awful or painful that context is. If we sanitize Twain's novel in the ways expressed, we cease to do the "heavy lifting" that his satirical writing asks us to do. Twain uses this now loaded word over and over again to describe Jim. Believe me, that word was not a friendly one then, just as now, but the twist is that Twain goes on to prove Jim the most honorable, the most moral, the most respectable character in the book. So the reader is left with this paradox - how can this half-person who we have such derogatory names for be the most honorable?

The same is true of this baptism story. If we clean it up and make it only a dramatic pause in the story of pure, unadulterated Jesus merely going through the proper motions in order to be pious, we disarm the paradox of divinity made flesh, of Jesus being the most human we can imagine and therefore the most divine. We should have to do some heavy lifting to understand this phenomenon, just as we have to do almost always to comprehend the action of God in our lives.

Jesus is not the same if we make of him a domesticated sacrificial lamb here only to appease the impending wrath of a vengeful God or as a payment for some sort of cosmic balance sheet that sets us forever in the black. The Kingdom is near, Jesus says...and then he preaches the Beatitudes, and we find out that something very different is happening here. Here's what defines blessing in the new era: people who realize that there is something more to life than just themselves...people who are content with enough...people who are caring, who are more interested in cooperation than winning and people whose inside world is set right - one might say is made righteous....because then the outside world becomes a different place.

That is the baptism into which we are given. It is not a baptism for a change in the way we behave first, it is first of all a change in our way of thinking, a change of our very hearts. Why? Because as Einstein once said, 'everything has changed but our way of thinking.' If we think of Jesus' mission as being a super-sacrifice for an angry God or his baptism as the forgiveness of our individual sins, we prove to ourselves as long as we take refuge in the delusion of the autonomous self, as long as we think of salvation and baptism as primarily individual, as long as we continue to concern ourselves with how 'I shall get to heaven', we have yet to undergo the baptism that Jesus underwent. We have yet to accept that sin is much more than what we do or don't do as individuals, but is systemic, built into the very ways that we organize. How can we post-Holocaust, post-Enron, post-Katrina, post-Wall Street induced recession believe anything else? Only by facing the sins of our past can we ever hope to repent of them for our future.

Jesus seeing the heavens opened up to him, a dove descending, and hearing the voice of a loving God saying you are my beloved child, in you I am well pleased was the mark that he was ready for the revolution – a revolution that turns the tables, that moves from winner take all to generous compassion, from looking out for number one to seeking a just and equitable future for all people...for although Jesus will defy John's expectations of his mission, he will still stand against the established order, he will still defy the status quo...he will still overthrow the tables in the temple and publicly denounce the marriage of God and state...he will stand with the marginalized and powerless and be a voice for those whose voice is never heard. If he were just some symbolic sacrifice...if he were just a wise rabbi or a profound thinker he would never have been marked for execution by a state that could not have his voice and action continue...it couldn't afford it. After all, this was a revolution. We stand still on the precipice. We must decide if we are willing to sacrifice everything in order to achieve whatever we call "winning" at the time or if we instead reject a sacrificial system and replace it with compassion and justice. The horrific events in Tuscon yesterday have to make it crystal clear to everyone that this is not a game, but a struggle for our very souls...and if we're not ready to do the heavy lifting, then we will end up with something far different than Jesus dreamed of in that river Jordan so long ago. The revolution continues. Are you ready to be baptized into it?