The Healing Fire of Baptism

A meditation on Luke 3: 15 – 17, 21-22 and Isaiah 43: 1 – 7

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church January 13, 2019

I spent a couple of days this week stuck in bed. When I wasn’t asleep, well, even sometimes when I was asleep, episodes of *Father Brown* were playing continuously on NetFlix. I watched entire seasons without seeing a single episode. Father Brown is a BBC production, inspired by the works of author GK Chesterton. The series, set in the early 1950s, unfolds in the fictional Cotswold village of Kembleford, where Father Brown is the parish priest at St. Mary’s Catholic Church. (Harry Potter fans would recognize Father Brown as Arthur Weasley, patriarch of the Weasley family.) Father Brown, much to the displeasure of the local constabulary, always seems to be first on the scene when a murder takes place. Much to their greater displeasure, he solves the crimes when they cannot. Every. Single. Time. After a few episodes, you find yourself craving hot tea and strawberry scones.

I love Father Brown. I delight in watching him untangle a mystery, but that’s not why I love Father Brown. I love Father Brown because he believes in redemption. He believes in the power of forgiveness. In every episode, the Father has an opportunity - rather unrealistically – to have a “heart to heart” with the guilty party. It isn’t nearly as corny as it sounds. Here’s what surprised me at first. The Father isn’t overly concerned about whether the criminal is captured or not. He does not often turn anyone in. (These are British mysteries…not horrific true crime or worse than true crime stories.) He would prefer for no one to hang, which happened a lot in those days.

He sits down, side by side with the guilty one, (often with a large knife or gun aimed his way) and says with a gentle and patient voice, “All I am concerned about is your *soul*.” They may proclaim to be an atheist. They may say they gave up on church a long time ago, but the Father doesn’t mind. He just wants them to have the opportunity to share their pain, the pain that provoked the crime. He is willing to face their pain with them, and offer them redemption. He offers God’s forgiveness to people who believe they are beyond God’s forgiveness, and he makes it sound as if it is the only reasonable way to behave.

To others who cannot grasp his vision for redemption, whose only focus is punishment, the priest says things like, *“Perhaps you think a crime horrible because you cannot imagine yourselves committing it. That isn’t true, you know. What really horrifies you is the secret and shameful knowledge that you* are *capable of committing it. We all are, I no less than you. We are not made* good *people or* bad *people. We are made people.*

We are not made good people or bad people. We are made people.

I’m not sure John the Baptizer saw it this way; he could be a little judgmental. But Jesus did. Jesus came down and met John at the Jordan and Luke gives us this public witness to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. That’s how we refer to it anyway, although it seems a bit strange to discount the first 27 years of Jesus’ life. Jesus was ministering from the moment of his birth; we simply don’t have the stories, or very few anyway. Before we can witness Jesus meeting John in the waters, we have to listen to John’s preaching…and he is both *on* fire, and preaching *about* fire.

Baptism by fire, and the fire that burns the useless husks of the grain. Listen again, from Luke 3: *The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.”* And after sharing those comforting words from John, Luke adds, *With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming* **good news** *to the people.* Threshing and sifting and eternal fires do not really sound like “good news,” and these are the images that tend to color our image of God. But Luke tells us this is good news, and that John was *appealing* to the people with these words.

Sometimes we get so attached to hearing something one way, that we can’t imagine it can mean anything else. Let’s go back to the words of Father Brown: “We are not made good people or bad people. We are made people.”

How husks are separated from the kernels depends upon the type of grain. Grains like rice can be “winnowed.” You’ve probably seen photos of winnowing in National Geographic: a farmer with a wide, shallow basket tossing the grains into the air, allowing the wind to carry the inedible husks away so the kernels can be revealed. Threshing, from which the word “thrashing” comes to us, originally required beating the grain to remove the hard husk. The problem is that when you beat the grain, you lose some of the bran, some of the kernels are lost along with the husks.

If we are to hear John’s metaphor as “good news,” then I think we must remember that every grain of wheat has a kernel and a husk. It is not that some of us are the bran, the kernel, and some of us merely inedible husks fit only for the fire. We each have that core of God’s light in us. Jesus simply wants to shake loose that hard rind, to set us free from all that we do not need to carry. All that we do not need goes into the fire. *Not us.* Jesus invites us to be released from all that separates us from God. Imagine those emotions, those habits, those thoughts that burden you…gone. So much lighter without that tight shell.

Envision if you will, that when we offer our prayer of confession, it is a winnowing. Let’s definitely go with winnowing over threshing…Lifted up by the wind, God invites us to be shed of the things that weigh us down and prevent us from being all that we are called to be. Tossed into the air, the shame, the guilt, the fear can fall away. That *is* good news.

Here is more good news:

“I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.”

“God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

“Your sins are forgiven. Get up, take your mat and go home.”

“Your sins are forgiven. Go and live a different life.”

“Your sins are forgiven…Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Over and over again, Jesus reminded people to live into their forgiveness. He once tried to explain to his disciples that the one who has been forgiven much, loves much, while “The one who is forgiven little loves little.” (Luke 7) It seems we spend much of our lives taking for granted the forgiveness with which we have been gifted. And, taking it for granted we then parcel out our own forgiveness in small, carefully planned allotments. We choose whom we will forgive. We choose whom we will not forgive. What if God treated us that way? We would cry, “unfair!” We would cry, “cruel!”

Having been forgiven much, we are called to forgive much.

Having been loved with a fierce and honest love, we are called to do the same.

We are not created good people or bad people. We are created people.

Today after you have received communion, you are invited to visit either of the fonts in the sanctuary – at the back or front – to touch the water and remember that you have been baptized and give thanks. Hear Jesus say to you, “Your sins are forgiven; go in peace.” Hear Jesus say to you “Abundant life.” Be washed once more. If you have not been baptized, you are also invited to come to the font and s offer your prayer of thanksgiving for God’s love. Our washing is merely a symbol; it is the wideness of God’s love which saves us. Let us pray.

Let us pray\*:

The struggles of our world feel overwhelming, Jesus;

beyond our ability to understand, let alone solve.

We do not have the capacity

to silence the justifications,

to heal the addictions,

to restore the brokenness,

to repair the destruction,

or to reverse the trajectories

of our self-centered, short-sighted weakness,

our heartless, dehumanizing aggression.

But, we do not face these struggles alone, Jesus;

You have aligned yourself with us,

in taking on flesh,

in going through the waters,

in laying down your life;

And you have invited us to partner with you,

in proclaiming Good News,

in freeing the imprisoned,

in restoring the broken,

in uniting the divided;

And you have given us the capacity,

the divine Spirit,

to be co-workers with God.

For this, we are eternally grateful. Amen.

\*prayer by John van de Laar, published on Sacradise.com