

## Washed People

July 16, 2006

Romans 6: 3- 4; 1 Corinthians 6: 9 – 11

The young parents take turns bathing the baby.  
Often, it's her job in the morning, after he has left for work  
when the house is quiet except for the morning radio music playing in the background.  
She hums as she fills the plastic tub,  
making faces and talking to the baby sitting in her jump seat.  
She tests the temperature of the water with her elbow,  
checks to be sure that the soap and towel are close at hand  
and then picks up the baby,  
gently easing her into the water,  
sudsing the wash cloth and touching it to her smooth, pink skin,  
loving this little one who was once so deeply a part of herself.  
In the evening, he does the baby's bath.  
It's part of the routine they are trying to establish to prepare her  
for a final feeding and a good night – or at least a good few hours of sleep.  
The baby likes his touch, too.  
Not quite so gentle but strong  
and growing more and more confident that she won't be harmed by his large hands.  
The baby giggles at the faces he makes as he scrubs her fine hair  
and then holds her still while he pours clean water over her head.  
She gasps and blinks as the water runs over her head and face  
but he holds her eyes with his and she knows she is safe.  
The young parents both know that they won't always be able  
to protect her and shelter her in the safety of their love  
but for now they can.  
Now, in these small daily rituals like bathing,  
they can show her that there is, in the centre of life,  
a love she can trust.

Many parents bring their sons and their daughters  
to the church for baptism because they believe that at the centre of life,  
at the centre of the universe, is a love they can trust.  
And God takes us, holds us and cradles us,  
touches us with gentleness, calls us by name and lovingly washes us.  
Gracefully, God lifts us from the hands of our small family  
into the arms of a planet-wide family,  
from the history of one family tree to become part of the family tree  
that is two thousand years long and longer  
with branches in all parts of the human race.  
Our identity expands at the same time as it deepens.  
Rising from the waters of baptism, we belong to the church universal.  
Rising from the waters of baptism, we have died to the power of sin and death

and are born into resurrected life.  
Rising from the waters of baptism,  
God calls us into a relationship with God that will last our whole lives.  
*Through God's grace in the sacrament of baptism, we are/become a washed people.  
God calls us, claims us and begins to transform us.*

At the centre of life, at the centre of the cosmos, is love.  
In love, God creates the world.  
In love, God created you and I, and the little one who is baptised today.  
We can trust this love at the centre of the universe.  
It yearns for the best, not only for you and I and Juliana but for all people  
and for the creation itself.  
It is the nature of love, however, not to force itself on others.  
Love is not something that seeks to control us  
for it is offered in freedom and can only be accepted in freedom.  
That means, we always have the choice.  
“The mystery of evil is that one may choose not to love, or not to respond to love.  
One can set oneself up as knowing better than God  
how to be or how to manifest one's destiny.” ( 36 Finding God in the Dark)  
It is possible to turn away from love.  
When that happens, the order once created in love becomes disordered.  
In chaos, in acts of destruction, in hatred,  
the quality of love is threatened; the world grows dark; we are vulnerable.  
There are times when our acts that lack mercy or compassion  
create a domino effect of pain, hurt and alienation beyond our control. (37)

In the Bible, Paul talks about death and life.  
By death, he means that disorder that threatens the love of God.  
He says that “all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus  
were baptized into his death.”  
The death of Jesus wasn't simply a quiet and peaceful ending of good and long life.  
Quite the opposite!  
The death of Jesus was a tortured execution by a state that valued power,  
that asserted control by violence.  
The death of Jesus on a cross  
shows us what happens when people and systems turn their backs on  
the love at the centre of the universe  
and try to make themselves the centre of meaning.  
In a mystical way, Paul says,  
when we are baptized, we, too, die with Christ.

All of us are vulnerable, all of us can lose our way.  
We can forget who we are.  
We can turn our backs on the love that created us.  
We can get caught up in acts of destruction  
that harm those who love us,

or that harm creation itself.  
Despite that, the love at the centre of life, does not end.  
It persists in loving – loving us, loving the world.  
It resists evil and disorder, pushes back against darkness.  
The love at the centre of life,  
that love that holds us in strong hands,  
that tenderly washes us  
and anoints us with healing oils,  
continues to call our name.

When we are baptised, we inherit a *wonderful* legacy.  
Like a vine, we are grafted into hardy root stock  
so that we can grow and produce good fruit.  
Like the very air we breathe,  
God moves within us and around us.  
Like the air we breathe,  
God's way of love, God's righteousness,  
is grace, a free gift offered us absolutely,  
for the making of a just and loving world.  
That gift, that legacy, is ours for the accepting.  
When we do respond and accept our inheritance,  
we do so with faith.  
We engage with the love that created us, that sustains us,  
that transforms us.  
In various ways, we make ourselves available to the Holy.  
Through prayer, reading the Bible, being with the Christian community,  
serving others and reflecting on the presence of Christ in our neighbour,  
we open our lives to a dialogue with God.  
As we do, we continue to be changed and given new life.  
Paul puts it this way:  
*Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death,  
so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,  
so we too might walk in newness of life.*

Sometimes it is hard to see our own spiritual story but  
when we look through the lens of another story or tradition,  
we see significance and beauty at the heart of a life lived in God.  
The New Zealand film, "Whale Rider", is the story of a Maori girl, Pia,  
who is born into a culture with a thousand year old tradition.  
The people of her village have had their identity and sense of purpose eroded  
by the forces of modern life that have thrown their world into disorder.  
Yet, the old people look for the birth of a leader  
who will help them find their soul and the centre again.  
The boy who would be that heir dies at birth, along with his mother.  
But his twin sister survives.  
She grows up with her grandparents.

Even though she is very close to her grandfather, and he loves her,  
he cannot imagine that she has anything to offer as a leader.  
Yet Pia seems to feel a calling.  
She is interested in the old ways, in the life of her people.  
She seeks to be trained with the boys her age who are not really interested in the training.  
She is a strong learner, an eager participant  
but, when she fails to stay discretely in the background as the only girl,  
her grandfather sends her away.  
Still, she persists and finds another teacher among the men.  
Out of her grandfather's sight, she disciplines her body and mind in the tradition.

Jesus did that, too, as a boy that age.  
Remember his parents leaving Jerusalem where they had gone on pilgrimage,  
assuming Jesus was in the company of the larger family.  
When they discovered, a day down the road, that he wasn't there,  
they returned to the city, only to find him sitting with the teachers  
in the Temple, discussing Scripture with the men.  
Within himself, he felt drawn to the tradition of his people.  
He wanted to learn, to understand, to follow.

When children are infants, they need and want to be held securely  
in the arms of their family and closest caregivers.  
As they grow older, there is a yearning to belong to something bigger.  
The church offers a meaningful place for children to belong.  
Among people who believe in the love at the centre of the universe,  
children can grasp a sense of mystery and awe.  
They can be known, respected and appreciated by people beyond their immediate family.  
And they can give so much to the worshipping congregation.  
I have the privilege of watching the faces of adults as they engage with children.  
So often, children create a sense of delight and wonder.  
They provoke feelings of hope.  
So children both receive from the community of faith, their people,  
and they give – a sense of purpose and delight and hope.

In the film, the people of the village face a crisis.  
The whales who are at the centre of their legends and  
central to their lives,  
are discovered beached.  
Their skin is drying out; they are helpless.  
Frantically, everyone rushes to help them.  
With wet sheets they cover the huge animals  
but know that what they need is to be oriented toward the ocean  
so that when the tide returns, they might have a chance to survive.  
With a tractor, rope and the strength of the villagers pulling together,  
they try to draw the lead whale toward water.  
The rope gives way.

In despair, the people move toward their homes.  
They will rest and return  
but, like their traditions and lives that seem beached and dying in modern New Zealand,  
they do not have a lot of hope.

Pia remains alone with lead whale  
With gestures of respect and love she touches the head.  
Then, carefully, moving from one barnacle clump to another,  
she climbs on top.  
Gradually, the tide changes and waves move toward the land.  
Gradually, the water lifts, love lifts,  
and the whale slowly and painfully and then, more quickly,  
moves to sea with Pia riding it.  
As the whale skims the surface of the water,  
Pia looks up at the clouds.  
She knows how vulnerable she will be  
when the whale reaches water deep enough to dive.  
But she is not afraid to die.

Like us when we go into the waters of baptism  
and die with Christ, Pia entrusts her life to another.  
She loves the whale and all it means to her people  
and she loves her people.  
In the dying and rising,  
life is redeemed, and a people are saved - by love.  
Pia's grandfather sees, at last,  
the gifts of leadership that his granddaughter has inherited  
and he prays for her survival and for forgiveness.

The movie's ending shows the long boat is completed,  
and many people carry it together into the sea while, on shore,  
others in traditional dress sing in celebration.

As the boat puts out to sea, Pia begins the chant  
as the people, with a new sense of purpose and identity,  
pull together on their oars, taking the boat out to ride among whales.  
"My name is Pia....I come from a long line of chiefs stretching back to the whale rider. I  
am not a prophet but I know our people will go on together with all of our strengths."

We, too, are a people.  
We have a unique tradition that stretches back in time.  
Our story is of love, at the centre of all life,  
revealed to us in a person named Jesus.  
That love calls us into relationship with the mystery of life.  
That love claims us in baptism  
as we die and rise again with Jesus.

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