

Sermon – June 7, 2015

Baptism of Liam

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

A few months ago I met two young people at Columbia University Medical Center where I worked. Jordan was 21 and Lyn was 29. Jordan was in hospital because he suffered with sickle cell anemia, a painful condition of his blood. He'd had a troubled life and had been a member of a gang in the Bronx since he was 10 years old. He told me that he had spent the year to January in Rikers Island prison and was trying to overcome an addiction to marijuana. His mother visited him only once and when he got out he found that his bedroom had been given away to a cousin, so he had to sleep on the sofa. He was an engaging young man with an embryonic faith.

I went to visit him for the second time and found him visiting other patients on the unit. He walked the corridors pushing his IV pole, dropping in to say hello to others. As we met and then walked back to his room he suddenly turned into another room saying to me "I think Lyn needs to see you first."

Lyn looked over at me from her bed and called me in. "Pastor, she said, I so need to see you now. Do you know the story of Jesus getting a new family." Lyn was tall with long, bleach blood hair. She was a transgender woman who was suffering bodily pain brought on by the state of fear and anxiety she lived in. She told me that she had been trying to reach out to her foster sister so she could sing her happy birthday but her foster dad had refused to allow her to make contact. She had been rejected by her birth family and now by her foster family. She lived rough and suffered much abuse at the hands of her boyfriend and many in the community. Rejection and abuse is a familiar part of the journey for many transgender people, most of which do not end up on the cover of Vanity Fair magazine.

Jordan and Lyn had found each other in the hospital and had formed a bond of friendship that gave support to each other in their time of need. Jordan though couldn't refer to Lyn by the female pronoun, but she didn't seem to mind. Still in the short time they'd known each other they had formed a solid relationship.

What struck me most as I sat and talked with them, and then prayed with them, was a deep sense of longing for connection, for love and for family. Lyn and Jordan had both been rejected by their families for various reasons and both seemed to be in this in-between place, fighting to survive long enough to find true happiness in a stable family. Both were reaching out to be found, to be seen and to be loved.

Jordan's desire for love was so strong that he surrounded himself with three large stuffed animals. Seeing him in his room seemed the antithesis of what I imagined a gang member to be like. Getting to know him though showed me the folly of my thinking. Getting to know Lyn also showed me again the heart of a person struggling in life. Both were vulnerable people with a fledging faith seeking a way to connect with church, a place that they understood would welcome them and see them for who they were as people, not caricatures.

As I spoke to them and talked about the meaning of the passage Lyn asked me to find for her - the gospel for today - I found myself in a moment unsure as to suggest to them that the church was the place to find people who would welcome them in. This feeling came from a place in my life where the church had rejected me for being gay, causing some of my friends to reject me for staying in a church that rejected them. Are we as a church, a church of welcome, as our signs say? Could we welcome a Lyn, or a Jordan, or a Caitlyn for that matter?

Today we do welcome Liam into the church along with Brendon and Shannon his parents, and all those friends and relatives that have come today to be witnesses to his baptism. The baptism rite is as ancient as the church itself and now is the right of initiation into the church of God. In essence it is a formal welcome made by the church for the uninitiated, a rite sanctified by God through the Holy Spirit. All of us today stand here to welcome Liam, and at times in the future to welcome him again and again and again, as he develops and grows into the fullness of his life.

Each of us who are baptized into our faith, a faith in God, a faith that was modeled for us by Jesus, are heirs of both our natural families and our faith family. We don't need to choose one over the other for we can participate in both if that is possible. As Liam grows and is exposed to the traditions of the church and our faith, we pray that he will find joy, love and support in

both families, so he is able to develop into the fullness of his inherent personhood, without fear and rejection. We as a church universally stand with him as we have done with so many that have come before, to support him in his life's journey.

In today's gospel passage Mary and Jesus' family rushed to the aide of Jesus to try to restrain him in the midst of the chaotic energy of the crowd that had surrounded him. This is a very natural reaction of a family when one of their own is under pressure. Mary and the family members had to learn that Jesus didn't need rescuing. He was his own person that was fully able to manage his situation.

What Mary and her family had to then acknowledge was that the natural relationship they had with Jesus through blood had to be reimagined. They had to come to understand that a different relationship was now emerging, a relationship that was more spiritual and inward, rather than natural and outward, which was the relationship of the Jewish culture. Jesus had to be released to a new family, a family of those that wanted to follow him, those that formed our earliest church. "Here are my mother and brothers" he said to those that sat around him. Here was Jesus welcoming these early believers into a new relationship, into a new family.

Brendon and Shannon you too might at some stage in Liam's life find yourself in Mary's sandals as Liam lives in to his own call in life. If we all are to honor Liam's full personhood we will need to connect with his spirit, and the inner person that he is. And we do this by listening to him, listening to his sacred stories and experiences, and guiding him when he needs support and encouragement. We will love him for who he is, a creation of God and welcome him always into our faith community.

Jesus stands at the center of our faith continually calling us in, toward a deeper relationship with him, to learn the very essence of what welcome means, from the one who welcomed all. Jesus yearns to have us close and hopefully we, like Jordan and Lyn, yearn to be close, to be welcomed, to be seen and to be understood, especially when one has been rejected by family and / or society. Jesus calls us in to be close, to be healed and to be in relation. Jesus also calls us to be open to see, and to hear and to speak the love that Jesus models for us when he welcomes the other. Jesus calls us to welcome Liam always.

Soon after Liam is baptized we will pray for him and ask God to be gracious to him and open his eyes so that he may see Jesus in all people of the world, may open his ears that he may hear Jesus voice, and may open his mouth so that he may speak of his experiences of Jesus working in his life, and in the lives of others.

And we should continue to pray for Liam, for Brendon and Shannon and their family, and for each one of us, that we may continue to welcome those that come into our midst, either here at the cathedral or in our communities. We should continue to pray that we will not be afraid to get to know them and to see them for who they are inwardly and spiritually. I continue to pray in thanksgiving that you have welcomed me in to the cathedral family and I look forward to getting to know you in the months ahead. Our world is full of people like Jordan and Lyn, and families like Liam's, who seek a relationship with God as an antidote to the world.

Let us always stand willing to welcome them as they are and allow the power of our love and welcome transform their lives, for this is how the spirit of God works in the church, and in the world.

Amen