

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

15th Sunday after Pentecost B; Holy Baptism of Whitney Taylor Locke

09.01.24; G. Miles Smith+

A bishop I know...told of an occasion when a person said to him: “I have trouble believing that our pastor really cares about what he is telling me in a sermon.” | Unfortunately, he did not say what his response was—except to say to us that it was...an unsettling reminder of the responsibility and risk of being called to preach.

This *is* a legitimate concern—not only for clergy—but for any Christians who in any way speak of God. And it is a Gospel concern too—Jesus very definitely emphasized the importance of the *inner person*...of the *heart* of a person.

So, every week as I work on my homily I try to keep in mind two primary things, among many others:

1. What do *I* really believe?
2. And what has the *Church* believed?

If I don’t ask the question about my “I” then I risk bypassing the inner work we are always called to by Jesus—where we can be truly known to ourselves...and thereby ready for a real encounter with God...through both what we believe...and do not believe...in any given moment.

But if I also don’t ask the question about the *Church’s belief* then I risk forgetting that my belief is never sufficient unto itself...and whatever impasses I experience in belief...are already familiar to the Church...from over two millennia of Christians who have thought deeply about the Bible and belief.

Sometimes you may hear more of my “I” in a homily...and sometimes more of the “we” of the Church’s belief. I could not in good conscience speak if I were not able to say for myself that “I *do* believe this much today.” But I will also need to emphasize what I perceive to be the authentic witness of the *Church*...because I know that my beliefs are always a work in progress...and the Church as a community through time has experienced more of God than I have.

This is the tension that we all live in as Christians...whether we are *self-identifying* Christians...*inquiring* Christians...*aspiring* Christians...or *tentative* Christians. It is important to name this tension between our “I”...and the larger “we” of the Church. This tension is not emblematic of some kind of defect of ourselves...or of Christianity. Living in this tension between what I can believe in any given moment...and what the “we” of the Church’s belief is...is actually the place where a real encounter with both ourselves and God is possible. |

I am never discouraged when someone says to me things like... “I don’t know if I believe everything in the creeds...” or “I am not sure if I should say all the words in our worship services because I’m not sure of all of them...”. I don’t find this kind of statement discouraging...because it means that the person has actually looked within themselves...and is telling me a truth in the moment about themselves...as best they can. They have named their “I”...while being willing to wonder out loud within the larger “we” of the Church. And that is the best that any of us can possibly do. |

So I want to name a rather startlingly fact...that is rarely recognized about our worship: *Every Sunday that we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, there is not a single occurrence in our prayers and responses of an “I”*. The Eucharist always speaks our “we”—it is always the “we” of the Church. Even when we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us...there is no “I” there...but “*Our*...Father, who art in heaven...”. In the Eucharist we are never once speaking *only* for ourselves. And yet of course we will wonder where our “I” is in the midst of this larger communal witness to God...and what our “I” believes. And wonder--we should. And while we

wonder...we are welcomed here. There has, in reality, always been far more room in the “we” of the Church for all our “I”s... than we have usually been prepared to imagine. |

There is however another worship service...that is somewhat different. The two great “sacraments” of the Church ...are the Holy Eucharist...and Holy Baptism. And it is in Holy Baptism that there is not only the “we” of the Church said--but also the naming of our “I”.

In just a few moments, you will have the opportunity to experience this. The family of *Whitney Taylor Locke* will speak their “I”s. And you...and me as well...will speak our “I”s. We will all be asked questions...and some of them will be easy to respond to. And some of them will inevitably put every single one of us into some tension between the “I” that we are at this moment...and the larger witness of the “we” of the Church to which we belong. *This is to be expected.* Pay attention and notice where you can recognize yourself quietly *flinching*...like the question asked of us in The Baptismal Covenant: “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons...?” Really? *All?* And yet the Church will ask us this...and we will all likely enter into some tension there...and in other places in the Baptism. But this sacrament, in all its “I”s, is never a *test*...never an *interrogation*...but an *invitation*...to an authentic meeting between God and us.

Holy Baptism is a personal address by God...a personal invitation from God...that evokes our “I”. Here today the Church will witness...that *Whitney*...is fully known and fully loved by God as an *individual person*. Baptism is the “I” of God...calling forth our “I”. The “I” of God recognizes the “I” of Whitney. And until she can claim her own “I” before God...the “I” of God...speaks to the “I” of Celia and Duke...George and Robin...all the witnessing family...all of you...and me. The “I” of God speaks to all our “I”s today. We are all fully known and fully loved by God as the person we actually are...and the person we can become...*and we are invited to respond as we are able.* |

So we are all called out...into our *individuality*...to say our “I”...to God...as best we can today. And that is an individuality loved by God.

We are all “I”s which at some point may very well say...to someone else...or to a priest: “You know...I don’t know if I am really a Christian...and I don’t know if I believe *all* these things we say.”

The Church, at “our” best, never frets such moments. Because the Church, beginning with the first disciples, has always recognized *itself* in such vulnerable moments. And the Church has learned—and perhaps we are learning too—that such vulnerable moments can lead us to rediscover...God...who is calling us all forth in all our individuality...inviting us again into a relationship with God...and the “we” of the Church.

And we will actually pray about that at the end of this Holy Baptism...that Whitney...and us all...may be blessed...to have:

“...an inquiring and discerning heart...the courage to will and to persevere...a spirit to know and to love God...and the gift of joy and wonder in all Gods works.”