

Baptism of the Lord “Allow it”

Bishop Frank Schuster

I have been to the Holy Land twice and there is nothing like remembering your baptismal vows in the Jordan River. Although the Jordon River is dried up most of the time now due to damming for irrigation purposes, there is a park that recreates a stretch of the Jordan River, just south of the Sea of Galilee. This park is a very meaningful place to visit. As you wade into the waters of the Jordan River, your imagination can be stimulated as the little fish nibble at your toes. Honestly, there are little fish there that nibble at your toes. For the record, I wouldn't recommend drinking the water given how many feet were near mine that day. Nevertheless, a pilgrimage to the Holy Land is special because you never read the bible the same way again. It is a place that really makes you think.

You can imagine the scene. St. John the Baptist is present performing one baptism after the other. All the sudden Jesus is standing in line. John knew who Jesus was because the Gospel says. “John tried to prevent him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?’ Jesus said to him in reply, ‘Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’” The Gospel says, “Then he allowed him.”

My friends, I think we can all understand why St. John the Baptist was uncomfortable with baptizing Jesus. Here we have the Creator kneeling before his creation, allowing himself to be submerged in a water ritual that can symbolize for us birth and rebirth. St. John the Baptist was uncomfortable with doing that for Jesus. His discomfort underscores why the Baptism of the Lord is the most fitting way for us to wrap up the Christmas season. That the Son of God was born a baby is scandalizing enough. The sinless immortal one wants to be washed by one who is anything but. The Baptism of the Lord is another dazzling display of what “incarnation” looks like. The incarnation not only looks like the Son of God being born as a baby on Christmas morning with a full human nature, but it also looks like the Son of God entering the waters of our existence, sanctifying that water by his presence. In this way, the waters of baptism become for us the doorway to eternal life, because it is in the waters of rebirth where we receive a share of Christ's divine nature.

All of that is a mouthful. However, if we reflect a little harder about the implications of being baptized ourselves, we can start living our lives with a broader perspective. We are invited to live our lives with a supernatural hope in the future that those without faith cannot grasp. This hope in the future can have an immediate influence on our decision making today because we view the world differently. This baptismal hope can influence how we treat the people around us, our family members and friends, our neighbors and co-workers, immigrants, the homeless, the unborn, the elderly, even our enemies, the list goes on. A baptismal hope should also influence how we view ourselves. God loves what we see in the mirror each morning. So should we. That person we see in the mirror each morning has a vocation that leads to eternal life. That knowledge should influence how we see ourselves, how we view our future, and influence the decisions we need to make today in light of our baptism. Yes, a baptismal consciousness offers us hope in a way those without faith cannot understand.

What is keeping us from that hope God wants for us? What is keeping us from receiving that amazing grace? I think the answer is in our Gospel reading today when St. John the Baptist protested the thought of baptizing Jesus. Jesus has to say, “Allow it now, John. Just allow it.” Did you see that, Jesus had to command John to just “Allow it”? I am struck by that because I think at the root of all our troubles when it comes to growing personally in a relationship with God is the fact that, like St. John the Baptist, we have difficulty “allowing it” because we don’t feel worthy. Have you ever felt unworthy of God’s love? Do you feel unworthy of God’s love right now? Do you feel like you do not deserve God’s love in your life? Is that why you haven’t been to confession in a long time? Is it because you don’t feel worthy? St. John the Baptist didn’t feel worthy of a relationship with Jesus either. Jesus doesn’t back down. Jesus says, “Allow it, John. Allow it.” What if Jesus is saying the exact same thing to you and me this Sunday? Can you hear him say, “Can you just let me into your life, into your world, into your heart? Will you please just allow it, and allow it now?”

My friends, what an invitation! What an opportunity! Do we dare? Do we dare allow Jesus into all the areas in our heart that we are not proud about? Do we dare let Jesus love us at that deepest level no matter how worthy we feel about it? Can we allow it? Are we ready for that level of conversion? If we do, a miracle might happen for us this week. With everything that can weigh heavy on our heart day after day, year after year, Jesus can still surprise us with hope. There is a catch though. We must allow it.