

# “Loved Into It” by Brenda Seat

January 10, 2016



## Second Sunday after Epiphany

This is the second Sunday in Epiphany and our lections have now moved beyond Bethlehem and the wise men; suddenly Jesus is grown and is being baptized. I think we know this story from Luke pretty well – Jesus goes to the river where John the Baptist is baptizing many people and after his baptism a dove appears and a voice says, “You are my beloved son, in whom I delight.”

I had a vastly different baptismal experience. I was twelve years old, and after giving a profession of faith in front of a church congregation in Japan, we all went to the public baths. I, along with several other Japanese congregants, lined up in white robes in front of the big bath where my father was going to baptize us. Knowing me, I know it is no surprise to you that I was crying, somehow overcome in that moment with what I was doing and the tears were streaming down my face. I was not able to sing the song that the congregation and the others who were going to be baptized were singing in preparation for our baptism. My father, noticing that I was crying, stepped over to me and whispered under his breath, “I am not going to let you drown!” I laughed and the tears stopped.

This story of Jesus’ baptism always makes me feel like he is a bit “other,” or that his divinity is shining through a bit too much. I must confess that I have real trouble with the idea of Jesus’ divinity. My problem is not so much a theological one, since I was indoctrinated in these things from an early age. No, my problem with the divinity of Jesus is that it lets me off the hook. Let me explain: If Jesus was divine, then all he did and said and who he was, came from that place of divinity. And since I am not divine—not even close, as I am sure Keith can tell you—then I can never ever live up to God’s expectations and so that lets me off the

hook. Love my neighbor as myself? Yeah, a good neighbor, sure no problem! But a cranky, hard to get along with neighbor? Only someone who is divine could do that!

“Love your enemies,” say a Donald Trump? Yeah, not divine, not going to happen. Help those who are poor or needy? Yeah, I can help a bit, but not too much – not enough to make it painful, because I am not divine. You see where this is going? And I am sure I am not alone in this. The emphasis on Jesus’ divinity distances me from his message and make it easy for me to ignore the call of Jesus to follow him.

During Advent we read the story of Anna and Simeon. Jesus’ parents brought him to the Temple and there Simeon and Anna greet the family and Simeon blesses the baby saying:

Now Lord, you are releasing your servant in peace, according to your promise. For I have seen with my own eyes the deliverance you have made ready in full view of the nations: a light that will bring revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel.

I suppose most biblical scholars would say that this was added to the story by Luke to show how important Jesus was and that it portends Jesus’ later ministry. But somehow that doesn’t work for me. Since Celebration Circle has invited us to “Transform Tradition” let me throw out an explanation that I have been about for a while.

What if Anna and Simeon weren’t prophetic or given some amazing insight? What if instead they believed so fully in God’s promise that a Savior would come that they had been going to the Temple every day, day in and day out, and they said these very words to every baby that came into the Temple in the hope that one of those children was indeed the Messiah. What if Simeon and Anna, in faith, believed that each one of these children had that potential and blessed them with these words and they had been doing that for years?

And what if we take that idea further to this week’s lections about Jesus’ baptism? What if God had been saying “You are my beloved child, in whom I delight,” to every single person who was being baptized that day, and has said it to every single person ever since, only they just hadn’t heard it?

One of the things we know best about Jesus is that he talked a lot about God’s love. We don’t know where he got that from. His mother? His father? Or maybe it was just that he came to this understanding as he read the Torah and heard the

stories of God and the people of Israel. Whatever it was, he was constantly trying to tell the disciples and the people who came to hear him preach that God loved them, not because they obeyed all the rules, not because they prayed and worshipped or tithed at the temple, not because of what they did, but because of who they were.

One of the stories that Jesus would have known is in our Hebrew Scriptures for this week.

Isaiah foretold the destruction of Israel and how they were going to be swept up into the Babylonian empire – a conquered nation in exile, plundered and the people sold into slavery. Earlier in chapter 39, Isaiah tells us that King Hezekiah entertained the King of Babylon and to honor him Hezekiah welcomed him and with pride showed him the treasury filled with gold and spices and oils, and showed him his armory and “there was nothing in his palace or in his whole realm that Hezekiah did not show him.” As a consequence, Babylon knew exactly how valuable and how vulnerable Israel was and Isaiah makes it clear that Hezekiah’s pride and foolishness was his ultimate downfall and the downfall of the nation he was entrusted to protect.

So for three chapters God scolds Israel for faithlessness, for their pride and for their blindness. “You have seen much but perceived little, your ears are open but you hear nothing,” God says in frustration and anger and describes in chilling detail the consequences of their pride and stupidity. Then we come to chapter 43, our lection for today, and suddenly the tone changes. “Have no fear,” God says, for I have redeemed you; I call you by name and you are mine...you are honored and I love you.” Undeserving, unfaithful, broken, exiled and worthless; their God says that he would give Egypt, the Assyrians and the Edomites, some of the richest most powerful nations of that time, as a ransom just to have this battered remnant of a people gathered together again. God is aware that they are still blind and deaf, but God wants them anyway, loves them anyway and wants to bring them back from the ends of the earth to be God’s people again. Just to be in relationship with them again.

God’s love is boundless and a bit crazy, right?

In our reading from Acts we only see a glimpse of the story that led up to Peter and John being sent to Samaria to lay hands on these new converts to Jesus’ way. The story begins right after Stephen was stoned to death in front of Saul, who had been

sent to persecute these new believers. After the stoning of Stephen the Bible says that violent persecution of the church began and so everyone but the apostles left Jerusalem and scattered around Judea and Samaria. Philip, the one who later would bless the eunuch, went to Samaria and preached the gospel and in spite of being in competition with a famous magician named Simeon, many Samaritans were converted and baptized. When the leaders in Jerusalem heard this they sent Peter and John to bless these new believers so they could receive the Holy Spirit.

But I want to step back just a bit here. Remember, they were in Samaria. This is where Jesus talked to the Samaritan woman and was questioned by his disciples with great disapproval. Jesus' story about the Good Samaritan was shocking to all who heard it. And yet in just a short time and with not a lot of controversy, here are Peter and John blessing and including Samaritans into the family of God. And of course let's not forget what happened to Saul as well.

God's love for us is scandalous. Without being even the tiniest bit worthy, God loves us.

Some of you know that the new Star Wars movie came out this Christmas. In order to prepare, Keith and I re-watched some of the older movies. I don't think I need to say "spoiler alert" since these movies were released in the 80's, but Darth Vader, the personification of evil, is really Luke Skywalker's father. Luke is of course stunned when he finds this out, but in spite of all evidence to the contrary, he holds out hope that there is still something good remaining in Vader and hopes that he can turn him back from the dark side. In their final confrontation Darth Vader, in spite of having denied that there is even a shred of goodness left within him, turns on his evil Master in order to protect his son and ultimately kills his Master, the evil Emperor. Vader is severely injured in this encounter and in his final moments Vader asks Luke to remove the oppressive dark black helmet so they can see each other face to face one last time, and then dies in his son's arms. This is one of the most touching and powerful scenes in these movies and in spite of being more than 30 years old it still has the power to touch a new generation. Our youngest niece, who is almost 6, watched this movie with her dad and he reported that she cried when Vader died.

What is it about this story that is so touching? I don't think it is about good vs. evil but rather I think it is the redemptive power of love.

God's love, once we experience it, is transformative. Like Darth Vader, or like the early Christians, we can transform our fears and addictions to power and surrender to the power of LOVE.

In one of the daily devotionals that I read, they recounted an interview between a famous Lutheran pastor and an earnest seminarian who asked the pastor what her spiritual practices were for getting close to God. The pastor responded: Why would I want to get closer to God? Whenever Jesus gets close to me I end up loving someone I hate, give away more of my money, or forgive someone I don't want to forgive." She said instead she often feels like God has come after her.

I have to say that I agree with that pastor. Oh, I do my spiritual practices, but more often than not they seem perfunctory. I think of them more as a way of keeping the IV line open- a sorta anticoagulant for my spiritual life that keeps me aware of the spiritual dimensions in my life, but that is not where the real work of Christian growth comes from. That comes with engaging in my daily life. It happens when I am with someone in the ER, it happens in my mission group, it happens in my marriage, it happened as I wrote this sermon, it happens in LIFE. When I am confronted with the messiness of life, challenged to love and to see others as important and as worthy as myself, when I have to cling to the hope that love will redeem what I cannot love and have to engage with those around me, that is when I can see God working in my life.

In 1963, Gordon Cosby, the founder of the Church of the Savior, preached the following:

This is the good news. We are not sent in to the world to make people good. God forbid! We are not sent to encourage them to do their duty. People have so resisted the Gospel because we have imposed new burdens upon them rather than calling forth their gifts. We are to let people know that God is for them. We are to let them know that they are not doomed to an existence that is less than fully human. God is calling them into the family of God's love; their uniqueness forms a part of the whole... The good news is that people can be what in their deepest hearts they know they were intended to be, and they can do what they were meant to do. As Christians we are heralds of these good tidings.

After I sent out my Dad's recent prayer letter, which recounts his baking 20 loaves of banana bread among other things, Muriel sent me back a response. She said, "Now

I know why you do what you do. You were loved into it.”

Yes! We were all loved into it. Unworthy on our own, selfish, bitter, unfaithful, and deaf to God’s voice that tells us we are beloved. But somehow in each one of us there was a time when God’s scandalous love broke through. Maybe it just sounded like “I’m not going to drown you!” but however we heard it, from that point on our brokenness was transformed into something useful, freeing us to be fully human and to use our gifts to heal the broken world around us.

Amen!