

First Sunday after Epiphany
Respect the Water
The Rev. Sue Sommer

If you were here for the Eucharist on New Year's Day – and 13 of you were – you might have noticed that the scouts and leaders of Troop 32 were gearing up for their annual New Year's Day canoe trip on the north branch of the west fork of the Chicago River. Last week, I ran into Karen Pinelli, one of the assistant scout masters, and asked how it went. She reported a great time had by all and that two fairly seasoned experienced scouts managed to overturn their canoe. Fortunately, being scouts and thus prepared, they were wearing life jackets and had dry clothing with them, so hypothermia did not set in. Not so well-prepared were the four young men, graduates of New Trier, who tragically drowned around the same time on an icy lake in Wisconsin.

The first rule for swimming, boating, kayaking, or any water sport is, "respect the water because it can kill you." Odd that a substance that comprises the majority of the surface of our earth, whose existence in liquid form sets our planet apart from all others in our solar system; a substance that is absolutely vital for life to exist, that is a basic building block of our very bodies, also can be deadly.

Well I was thinking about this conundrum in light of our gospel for today. The first Sunday after the Epiphany is always the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord. This year we hear Luke's version, and we pick up where we left off in Advent, with John prophesying of the coming of the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, whose winnowing fork is in his hand, who will gather the wheat and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. OK, so John had issues. Or, at the very least, had worked himself into a lather as prophets can and do. Fact of the matter is, Jesus did send the Holy Spirit upon the disciples on the Feast of Pentecost, 50 days after his resurrection. Tongues of fire did appear above the heads of the disciples. In this way, Jesus did baptize the apostles on the feast of Pentecost, if we understand baptism as the beginning of a journey in Christ – and we indeed should.

But winnowing fork? Gathering wheat and burning chaff? As metaphors, that sounds more like what John the Baptist was up to – kicking butt and taking names by the shore of the Jordan. Jesus, by contrast, was one who spent his earthly ministry restoring the least, the last, and the lost. He healed the sick, he preached the word, and he empowered 70 of his followers to teach and heal as well. He sent them out, and they returned, amazed at how God, working through them, healed the sick and restored those who were lost back into the fold. I don't see any evidence in the gospel that Jesus designated some people as wheat and others as chaff. I think WE do that. I think the Church, to her everlasting shame, has done that over the centuries, and in some expressions of Christianity still do. But I do not see evidence of Jesus casting certain people to the wind because he saw them as worthless or as an encumbrance on society. Rather, I think we are to understand that the wheat that John refers to, that Jesus will carefully gather, is our precious, essential humanity which God loves deeply and eternally. And the chaff is the stuff that gets in the way: our pride, our arrogance, our fear running amok, our capacity to hoard resources so that a few have an abundance and the many have nothing. The Church calls it sin. It's the dead stuff that humanity inexplicably clings to, that we (contrary to all reason) privilege over the life that God created and loves beyond measure. That is what Jesus came to separate from us. That is what Jesus came to burn.

When we get that, when we begin our journey of faith in baptism, we begin to see that every single person on the face of this earth is a precious grain of wheat in the eyes of God.

Which brings me back to water. We do not symbolically burn people at baptism, but we do symbolically drown them with water in baptism. It's a shocking image, and hard to see in a church like ours that has a tiny font, but anyone who has undergone baptism in a river or a lake, or even a

baptismal pool, knows what it is to go down into the water and rise back up from it. As Christians, we are called to respect the water, not only because it can kill us but because we use it to symbolize the washing away of that which in us is dead. All that stuff that separates us from God. All that stuff that humanity clings to that we think will bring life and hope and security and happiness, but which cannot because it is dead. Dead, and worthy only of being washed away.

So baptism, understood this way, is less about securing our future as it is about transforming our present. Because the Kingdom of God is now. It extends into eternity, but it was ushered in in the birth of Christ which we just finished celebrating. It was inaugurated with Christ's baptism which we observe today. It was experienced in Christ's earthly ministry. It was brought to fruition in his crucifixion and resurrection. It was put into action in the world at Pentecost, where Jesus sent the Holy Spirit and fire upon the apostles who, in turn, set the world ablaze with the message of God's salvific love. That is our heritage. That is our baptism. Not for nothing do we use such an ambivalent symbol as water – life-giving, death-dealing – to begin our journey in Christ. May we rejoice and lean in to the life that is life indeed.