

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



**“In Line with Sinners”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**The Baptism of the Lord Sunday (Year B)
January 7, 2018
Mark 1: 4-11**

In one of her sermons, Barbara Brown Taylor shares a story from a book she has just read, *The Patron Saint of Liars*, by Ann Patchett. The book is about a woman named Rose Clinton, and her daughter, Cecilia. Rose and Cecilia live at Saint Elizabeth's Home for Unwed Mothers in Habit, Kentucky, because Rose is employed there as the cook. Cecelia spends her years growing up in this place, surrounded by young women who are giving up their babies for adoption. These young women dote on Cecelia and mother her as if she were their own. One day, Cecelia meets one of the new girls who has just arrived at St. Elizabeth's. Taylor writes:

Her name is Lorraine. She is skinny, with a head of red curls, and she is about to have a nervous breakdown while she waits to be interviewed by Mother Corinne, the nun in charge. Cecilia decides to help by giving her some advice.

"The guy who got you pregnant," she tells Lorraine. "Don't say he's dead. Everybody does that. It makes Mother Corinne crazy."

Lorraine sits on her hands and is quiet for a minute. "I was going to say that," she says.

"See?"

"So what do I tell her?"

"I don't know," Cecilia says. "Tell her the truth. Or tell her you don't remember."

"What did you tell her?" Lorraine asks, and Cecilia is speechless. "I sat there, absolutely frozen," she wrote later. "I felt like I had just been mistaken for some escaped mass murderer. I felt like I was going to be sick

. . . No one had ever, ever mistaken me for one of them, not even as a joke.

The lobby felt small and airless. I thought I was going to pass out."¹

Cecelia didn't mind being with the girls, talking with the girls, laughing with the girls, and giving advice to the girls. But one thing was clear to her, and she assumed it was clear to everyone. She was *not* "one of the girls." Lorraine assumed she was like her. Cecilia was appalled! She liked the girls well enough, but she was not *like* them.

I know a man, an upright citizen, hardworking farmer, committed Christian, and long-time member of his local church. Recently, this man (we'll call him Lester) had been elected to serve on the Board of Deacons at his church. One of his first assignments was to work at the homeless shelter down the road in the closest city. He was anxious about this, as he had never been with homeless people before, but he took his duties as deacon very seriously, so he put on his calendar that he would go to the shelter on Tuesday morning of the next week. When Tuesday morning arrived, Lester was up bright and early tending to the

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1997), p. 32-33.

needs of the animals on the farm. But wouldn't you know it, this morning one of his cows was suffering awfully from a sore and swollen hoof. It took Lester almost an hour to ease the creature's pain, and by the time he was finished it was later than he had planned and he had no time to shower and change. He had to get to the shelter. They were expecting him. With a big sigh, he climbed into his truck in his work clothes. He hoped the folks at the shelter would understand.

As he drove into the city, Lester could not help but notice all the filth along the streets and a couple of pairs of eyes peering out at him from the alleyways. When he entered the shelter, he saw that it was full of mostly men of all ages and shapes and sizes. They had finished breakfast and were sitting around playing cards or filling out forms or reading magazines. He walked over to a table, greeted the men who were there, and sat down hoping to start up a conversation. Before long, they were talking comfortably with one another about everything from basketball to the weather to the state of the economy. Lester was pleased at how well he was doing on his first visit and decided he would like to visit more regularly. As he thought about this, a new guy approached their table. He looked like he had just come in from the cold. He nodded at Lester, "Hey. Where can I

get some coffee around here?" Lester looked up and was just about to direct the guy's question to his new friends at the table when it hit him. This homeless guy, who had just walked in off the street, thought he was one of them! He thought that he, Lester, a fine, upstanding Christian member of his community was one of them! A druggie! An alcoholic! A mental patient! Homeless! He stared at the man with his mouth wide open. He came to talk to them, to be with them, but certainly not to be mistaken for one of them!

Have you ever felt like Cecelia and Lester? Have you ever been in a place where you think, "I hope nobody thinks I am one of these people!"

In our passage for today, we find a radically different scene. Jesus, who is without sin, has come from Galilee to the Jordan River to stand in the baptism line with the hopes of being baptized by John. There he is, in line with a whole bunch of sinners who hoped that John could clean them up and turn their lives around. You can almost imagine a church usher, all dressed up, marching over to Jesus and saying, "Uh, excuse me sir. You aren't supposed to be here. This line is for sinners only. If you stay here, they might think you are one of them."

“They,” meaning “the sinners.” After all, “they” had heard that John was baptizing with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. These folks were ready to have their sins forgiven. They had a long line of sins and they were counting on John to make them clean. And there Jesus stood, in line with sinners, right there with them. He was just one of the guys, patiently waiting to be baptized and to hear John say something like, “By the waters of baptism and the power of the Holy Spirit, your sins are forgiven.” Jesus simply took his place and waited his turn . . .

Ah, the irony! That you and I, and Lester and Cecelia, who are not without sin, do whatever we can to keep from being suspected of being a sinner, while the one who is truly without sin would stand in line with sinners, seeking to be washed with those waters of baptism. This is humbling, is it not? To see Jesus making clear that he stands with us all, stands with sinners who know they are sinners and sinners who don’t know they are, stands with us before, during, and after we receive the waters of baptism. He does not set himself apart, but embraces his humanity. He doesn't care that someone might think that he is in

need of forgiveness. He stands in line with the sinful from every walk of life and makes his way up to John the Baptizer.

In doing so, Jesus reveals his true identity. After John baptizes him, the heavens split apart and the Spirit descends "like a dove" upon Jesus. And a voice from heaven claims Jesus as his own, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased." And suddenly, we know. All those who read this gospel know. This Jesus is in the line just like everyone else, but he is different. He is the Beloved, the Son of God.

In Jesus' baptism, we see a glimpse of the holy miracle that happens at our own baptisms. In baptism we are adopted into the family of Gd. The waters of baptism remind us that God has come to us in Jesus Christ, who has born our sins on the cross, so that we might have a new life in Christ. Does this mean we will never sin again? No, for we continue to turn away from God and, like Lester and Cecelia, think of ourselves more highly than we ought. But in our baptism, we are clothed with a new strength, a new self, through which we are able to turn toward God in humility and seek to love God with all our heart and soul and

strength and mind, and to love one another. Baptism directs our faith and our lives to Christ alone as the savior of our sin and the giver of new life.

I wonder if Cecelia and Lester might have had a different reaction had they imagined Jesus with them in the house for unwed mothers, or in the homeless shelter? Would they have imagined Jesus with *them*, holier and set apart from the others, or would they have realized that Jesus is always first and foremost with those who need him the most, who know and claim their sin, who long for God's forgiveness, and who rejoice when they are called beloved. Would they have realized that Jesus is *always* in line, and at table, with sinners, with us all. Would they have recognized Jesus' place in their midst? Will we?

May God grant us the courage and the humility to see Christ in line and at table with us and for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

© 2018: Mindy Douglas

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

© FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 2017. FOR PERSONAL AND EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY.