

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Baptism of Jesus

January 7, 2007 –

Text: Ephesians 3:1-12; Luke 3:15-22

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“ My Struggle in the Mystery ”

Just about everyone, regardless of ideology and party affiliation, couldn't help but be moved at the sight of the new Speaker of the House, surrounded by children, gaveling the 110th Congress of the Republic into session. This was Speaker Pelosi's baptism, full of grace and promise, of a woman at last reaching the top of Congress by her skills, grit and determination. This was also her baptism into political power and prestige and a symbol of hope: from kitchen to Congress, as she put it. But the trials of the new vocation she was baptized into will not wait in the rough and tumble of power politics, the problems of governing the nation the distribution of its wealth. But her political baptism is still a message to women and men, and especially to the girls and boys of America, that a struggle for freedom and rights does win out in the end for this vocation too is now open to women as well as to men.

Those of us who have been part of another struggle for freedom and rights, that of sexual minority persons, feel a double-edged twinge in Speaker Pelosi's ascendancy to power –joy at her accomplishment for women and men, but also a little pain in our consciousness that our struggle is far from over; yet to be won. Oh, yes, when will the day come when sexual preference will not hinder ascendancy to power and leadership of the nation and in the church? When will it come, O God? When?

Well that's bit of a mystery folks –and the earnest reflections of the apostle Paul in the second reading from sacred Scripture fills in some of the picture for us. Paul devoted much of his ministry, to use our language, struggling to win the rights of Gentiles into the young Christ community, the church. At the time of his conversion, this young Jewish church, for Jesus was a Jew and so were all of its first leaders, this young Jewish church now has Gentiles knocking on its doors. This was unprecedented and the young church had to figure it out all by itself.

Some went into denial declaring Christianity was a Jewish religion alone. Where are they today? Some declared that Gentiles had to become Jews first and then they could become disciples of Jesus. Paul, as his writings attest, was not so quick to judge, but in surprising humility chalks it up as a mystery of God that Gentiles are coming to Christ, a mystery too that in Paul's own baptism he has been called into that struggle and its faithful resolution.

And he, for the most part, is given the grace to be able to bring progress in the struggle that would be faithful to the Gospel, that is, brought really joyous news to Gentiles and Christian Jews alike. In his lifetime it was far from over –Gentiles were at best grudgingly welcomed into the community of faith and even less so into positions of power. But he articulated the foundation of all future struggles for rights in the church that by grace through the gift of faith in Christ we are all brought into the one family of God.

For it is in baptism we are all, regardless of any distinction whatsoever, forgiven our sins

and wrongs to all others and to God, and we are made equal in the presence of God. So revolutionary was this teaching that Paul had the right to attach the word “mystery” to it. But that mystery had been revealed to Paul and to all disciples willing and open to listen prayerfully.

We are part of that mystery this very day. We do not have all the clear answers in the struggle we have been baptized and called into, but we do have the fruits of the Spirit in our lives and in this assembly. As Jesus was baptized, the Spirit came upon him and she has come upon us. Don't short yourself on how gifted in the Spirit you have been made! Each one of you!

Yet Jesus' baptism led to trials and struggles in his life, even that horrible unjustified death, the explanation of which falls under Paul's category of the mystery revealed over time by God in the ever-changing but always loving, renewing and forgiving Gospel.

It's a mystery to me sometimes why God has waited so long to reveal in our baptismal life as the church the equality and calling of all persons of all sexual identities. Once you see it, it is so obvious. But that is the nature of all mysteries –we are somehow blind to what is in front of our noses until someone takes the patience and prayer to show us –and the Holy Spirit pours in. Then it is obvious.

It is a bit of a mystery to me why we have to struggle for justice and for rights for all people. Why does it have to be so hard at times? Why do we feel like we are walking uphill and sometimes backwards as we struggle? It's a bit of a mystery to me sometimes why people who wear the name of Christ are working so hard to deny equal rights. We know it has to do with the pervasive culture of sexual denial in religion, with ignorance of how to read the Bible in Christ and with plain fear of letting go and letting God lead. But why it has to be a struggle is a bit of a mystery to me sometimes.

Why must there be struggle? Well, that deep theologian of the Lutheran life, Garrison Keillor, put it this way in the movie *Prairie Home Companion*: We Lutherans have been brought up with the notion that life is always a struggle. And, if you ever feel happy, be patient, this too shall pass. We may not like it. We would do everything we could to change it. But the truth is, mystery it is also, there will always be a struggle to bringing forth truth into reality in both the church and society.

For St. Paul to apply the word “mystery” to the struggle of equality for Gentile and Jew in Christ was not a dodge, but a source of encouragement in the midst of the struggle. This was how the game of life, justice and liberty are to be played. The rules of the game are God's will. But we are the players.

But we are not alone. When Jesus was baptized, as we celebrate today, Christ joined in our struggles and Christ struggled for all of us, all of humankind. Christ was with the labor movement as it struggled and still struggles for justice in the workplace. Christ was with African Americans as they faced their daunting struggle for simple equality. Christ was with women as they entered the trials of winning equality. Christ is with us as we struggle to bring equality in sexuality for all. And Christ will be with those who bear the cross in new and yet unimagined struggles in the coming generations.

It is a bit of a mystery. Paul is right. But we will experience the emotions Nancy Pelosi is rightfully feeling, our cause will succeed because it is true. So, St. Francis, let us not lag in our

vision. In the darkness let the light of Christ shine brightly forth from us. This is our baptismal vocation, our calling and our struggle. Amen

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