

Ro. 12: 6-16

Mk. 1: 1-11

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Do you remember what communications were like prior to cell phones, voice mail, fax machines, call forwarding, text messaging, or email accounts? Being in an office with 2 telephones and a computer signaling incoming contacts, all at the same time, can be mind-numbing. Some days the word “bombardment” is an apt description of our experience of information flow and the demands made on our attention. While I cannot say I want to go back to the days of having an 8 party line for telephone service, which was a common occurrence in rural areas in the South, there may well be among many of us a desire to have simpler and more direct conversations. Face to face interactions give us a chance to hear and see nuances, sense the intention of another person, and seek clarification when we feel uncertain. How many times do we miss all of that in an email, and miscalculate what the other person wanted to say? The heart and soul of what we are after becomes obscured. So the tether that holds us together is lost. It is a unique dilemma of our age. The idea of multi-tasking is frankly, bunk. We cannot truly have our full attention on 2 separate things at the same time, so our focus becomes scattered and diffused. One of the struggles of our time is losing our sense of what is most important—what is central and calls for our best energies; in short, keeping the main thing, the main thing.

St. Mark was a master of going straight to the point. He alone refers to his writing as a “gospel”, that is good news. The word was used by emperors to denote an announcement of a victory, often in battle. That should give us an insight into what Mark is saying. He has no birth narrative, no long list of ancestors, no Magi or Shepherds, and no scene with a manger. Instead he goes right to the heart of the matter, to the main thing—**Who Jesus really is**. Yes, there are a multitude of expectations about the Messiah, yes, there have been in the prophets and the Psalms a number of images expressing the yearnings and hopes of people across the years, and yes, some of those images seem to be in conflict with the world and what would make us comfortable. But Mark announces with simple clarity the main thing; in this man we encounter not what the reign of God is like, but the reign of God itself. Here something new and long hoped for breaks into the world. Rather than being slaves with no homeland, and ruled by a despot, a new homeland is created where all may belong. There are no mixed messages, confused emails, or dropped phone calls due to poor reception. The message is clear.

All of this is wrapped up in the event of the Baptism of our Lord. This event created a difficulty for the early faith. Why did Jesus need to be baptized? We profess that he was without sin, so baptism seems out of place. In this account we have something a bit unusual; a private epiphany. Only Jesus hears the voice, but in truth it is spoken to the whole church. And here, I think, is the answer to why Jesus allowed the baptism. He receives **first** what God would give to all of us as well; a direct communication that comes as news we have not heard before—“You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased.”

We seem somehow to not quite catch that with all its force. We like to know our heritage and genealogies; where we come from and what makes us who we are. Those things often give us a sense of well-being and identity, and that identity impacts how we live. But we carry within our souls and hearts the stories of our failures and disappointments, too. Those become added to the script that gives us a sense of who we are. I am often struck by residents who wonder if they have

done enough for their children, or whether they have cared and acted as much as they think they should for an ailing partner, even when they have poured themselves out. We have a penchancy for recalling our shortcomings and that becomes the despot, the ruler of this age which robs us of our sense of the very gift God grants us; belonging.

I grew up in middle Tennessee on a fair sized farm. My grandparents were just across the field, and more often than not we had dinner with them. It was my unlucky assignment, as the oldest grandchild, to be sent down into the storage area to retrieve the food we would have. That area was referred to as a root cellar. It was dug down in the ground to provide a cool, dark environment where canned foods and root vegetables could be kept. It was dank, musty, and frankly a pretty creepy place. The old wooden door would creak as you opened it and then you had to stretch your hand out in front of you and wave it around to find the single cord hanging down from the single light in the center of the cellar. Normally there would be a fair number of spider webs between you and that cord! The mice came in to escape the summer heat and the winter cold, and of course the snakes would come in for a free meal of mice. One more than one occasion I stuck my hand down into a container of dusted potatoes and pulled out more than I had counted on!! As I grew up and moved away, I thought I had left that root cellar behind me. But I have come to realize that it travelled with me, not literally, but as a living symbol. Its' darkness reminds me of what resides down in me. There are sins that call out to me and accuse me of not being worthy of God's care. There are 20 thousand generations of genetic maneuvering that make me who I am. And there are corners in that cellar that I would not want you to know about and which I sometimes wish I did not know existed. Perhaps you too have your own image, which bespeaks of the struggle to find your real identity. Some of these are the despots and rulers of this age that throw shadows over us, and whisper lies into our souls that God could never make us part of his life.

What is needed by all of us is a real, clear, and direct communication that tells us the unmistakable truth about who we really are. What defines us and makes us who we are, are not the lies told by sin, but the acceptance spoken to us in the water of baptism. Those waters wash out the residue of what is broken and partial, and promise us a place, in the Kingdom. The Baptism of Jesus is a foretaste of our own inclusion into God's life. The reign of God is exactly that. It is God deciding that we matter so much to the divine heart that nothing will be allowed to claim us above that love. Amen+

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