

Listen to Your Life

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

January 10, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

Luke 3:1-22 *As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison. Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

On the liturgical calendar this Sunday is named *Baptism of the Lord*, and we hear Luke's story of Jesus' baptism. About this event each gospel tells a somewhat different story. Mark and Luke have the most direct telling. In Matthew John the Baptist and Jesus debate about whether or not it's even proper for John to baptize Jesus. And then there is the Gospel of John where it is not clear that Jesus is baptized at all. A common element in Matthew, Mark, and Luke in their telling is the voice at the conclusion of the story, "You are my Son, the Beloved...." It is both the first and last word of Jesus' life. Reading like the concluding statement in some adoption papers, it is Jesus' identity that will shape his destiny.

Growing in the direction of our commitments is what baptism, and the faith that informs it, is all about. It is the lens through which we view our experience; it is the statement of relationship God has forged with us. Above all, it is a pathway toward surprise.

Let me tell you about my conversation with Tom, one of those rock-solid, dependable, honest, hard-working, dedicated people we all depend

on so much. One day he said to me, “I pruned my crab apple tree last spring for about the millionth time and I’m about to do it again. Next to dandelions, I think that tree’s got to be one of the biggest weeds in my yard. Suckers rise from the roots, tendrils hang down from the branches. Any time I lop off branch, a new one will grow in its place. I used to have two trees, and I cut one down. Now I have a crab apple bush growing up in its place.”

I told him I had several and knew they could be pretty entertaining. He was quiet for a few seconds, and then said, “Those trees have become my metaphor. Friends tell me I’m going through a mid-life crisis, and maybe they’re right – not “crisis” in the sense of falling apart, but in the sense of change or process. You know, what’s happening is that, perhaps for the first time, I’ve started listening to my life.”

“And, you’re hearing some strange music, I’d guess,” I said.

He grinned and said, “I’ve always had what I’ve considered a pretty straight-arrow life. I had good folks, a pleasant childhood, did all the normal, programmed things like school and sports and church – it was all positively conventional, and I do mean ‘positively’ – it was all good stuff.

“And, I went to college and got married and got a job and climbed the ladder of responsibility and was successful. And we had kids and we volunteered and we joined the church and we did all the conventional things ‘good people’ like us do.

“But, the most conventional thing we did was pretend. It came to me the other day when I looked at the crab apple tree and made plans to trim it. All these years I’ve been whacking away at my life in order to keep it ordered and tame, to keep it looking good, to keep the pretending working, and all the time my life has continued to push up new growth and make

new branches, and instead of letting these spots grow and see where they'd lead, I lopped them off. And I've come to realize how afraid I've been most of my life – afraid that if I didn't follow a script, I'd be lost; afraid that if I allowed myself to grow, I'd look spiritually ungainly or strange. And, afraid that if I let those spots grow, I'd have to change.”

That conversation with Tom made me focus on my own life, where my growth points were, and where I was snipping them off instead of seeing where they led. I thought about Frederick Buechner's comment that, at root, all theology is autobiography. If our autobiographies are all about what we've cut off instead of what we've pursued, our lives will end up being a pile of brush. It is within our stories that we encounter God, God encounters us, and we are adopted, and we learn who we are and what our lives are for.

Today a new year is inaugurated in this church's leadership. Each time we observe this, we are eagerly welcoming into our future new variations on the theme of baptism, for our thoughts and decisions, our choices and insights represent the unique qualities of individuals, all sharing the same adoption as daughters and sons of God, but each called to bring some entrepreneurial twist to what faithfulness means. We need to know that our baptisms don't call us to conformity, but to growth and change and adventure. We need our leaders to know that and live like that.

Listen to your life. Report to the rest of us what you hear. Grow where you are planted. Prune what is dead and useless, but do not prune out creative ungainliness or else your baptism will be tamed, conformed, neat and tidy, and unlike God's insistent, energetic, lively and profuse creature – the apple tree.

Anthem**Jesus Christ the Apple Tree**

1. *The tree of life my soul hath seen,
Laden with fruit and always green:
The trees of nature fruitless be
Compared with Christ the apple tree.*

2. *His beauty doth all things excel:
By faith I know, but ne'er can tell,
The glory which I now can see
In Jesus Christ the apple tree.*

3. *For happiness I long have sought,
And pleasure dearly I have bought:
I missed of all; but now I see
'Tis found in Christ the apple tree.*

4. *I'm weary with my former toil,
Here I will sit and rest a while:
Under the shadow I will be,
Of Jesus Christ the apple tree.*

5. *This fruit doth make my soul to thrive,
It keeps my dying faith alive:
Which makes my soul in haste to be
With Jesus Christ the apple tree.*