

Lucia Lloyd's sermon  
First Sunday after the Epiphany, The Baptism of our Lord, Year A  
January 9, 2011

I like trees. They're strong, they're beautiful, they're peaceful. I wouldn't blame God at all if God had created a world and filled it with some really nice trees and then just left it at that. Give them some sunlight, some water, and some dirt, and they're good to go. Trees always do exactly what they're supposed to do. Human beings, not so much. We human beings have our jealousies and our hypocrises, our addictions and our obsessions, our violent behaviors and our self-defeating patterns. In fact, it kind of boggles my mind that God would take the sacredness of divine love in all its exquisite splendor, and entrust it to such an unreliable bunch as humanity is. God gives us two simple commandments, "Love God. Love your neighbor. And how often we botch it.

God is perfect. Human beings are not. Mahatma Gandhi's response to Christianity was this, "I like your **Christ**, I do not like your **Christians**. Your **Christians** are so unlike your **Christ**." This is sometimes quoted in a scolding tone, but I think well, yeah, the Christians are unlike Christ for the simple reason that human beings are unlike God. I try to be good, but I'm not Jesus. On the surface, it may sound like an argument against Christianity that Christians are unlike Christ. But actually, one of the reasons I believe in Christianity is that I love the good news that there is something better than humanity, something that is not limited by all the flaws and weaknesses that pull down my own life, as well as the lives of my neighbors. The bad news is that Christians are unlike Christ. But remember, the good news is that Christ is unlike Christians.

It would have been safer, in some ways, for God to just remain in pristine perfection, separate from a humanity that clearly is not worthy of God. It would have been safer for Christ to steer clear of followers who are so incapable of following simple directions. We human beings take the most beautiful messages of hope and peace and then end up with warfare and the Jerry Springer show.

And the more judgmental we are toward the faults of other people, the more our judgmental attitude is a fault of our own. It's a wonder God has the patience for any of us.

So we see prophets telling us to repent. We recently read about John the Baptist's calls to us to repent. John the Baptist seems like a pretty fearless kind of guy, preaching, "You brood of

vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come! Bear fruit that befits repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father.' For I tell you God is able to raise up from these stones children of Abraham. Even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees, whoever does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who comes after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." John has spent his whole ministry in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

And then Jesus shows up. Jesus asks John to baptize him. John tells Jesus "No." In the exact words of scripture, "John would have prevented him." After all this preparation, Jesus asks John to do one thing, and John says "no!" John goes on to say, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

There are plenty of times in scripture when people tell Jesus what they need, and Jesus meets that need. There are plenty of times in our own lives when we tell Jesus what we need and Jesus meets our need.

But we also have times in our lives that are John the Baptist moments, the moments when the task God has set before us seems like too much for us, when we feel inadequate or unworthy to do what God is calling us to do. We all have our moments when God tells us to do something, and we say, "no." We try to prevent the work of Jesus. We start talking about what we need instead of doing what God needs us to do.

We might think this is not a very auspicious beginning for Jesus' ministry: the very first thing he asks someone to do and the person refuses. Even the person who has been preaching fiery sermons about repentance refuses. Jesus would have had good reason to be angry with John the Baptist. But instead, Jesus speaks to John gently, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting to fulfill all righteousness." It is as if Jesus is saying, "Well, yes, you have needs. Well, okay, so you're not worthy. But it's time to get started with this ministry, so go ahead and do what I need you to do now, and that's the way to fulfill all righteousness.

The good news is it's not all about your worthiness. I've met some people who don't want to hang around with church folks because they think they're not good enough for church folks. I've met other people who don't want to hang around with church people because they think they're much too good for church folks. I've had times when I've felt not good enough, and other times when I felt much too good. But our worthiness issues are not what matters most.

God reaches out to us not because we are worthy. God reaches out to us because we are loved. None of us is worthy. Each of us is loved.

God could have taken the sacredness of divine love in all its exquisite splendor, and given it only to the trees. But instead, God gives it to you, and to me. We are not worthy. But God is worthy.

The next time you feel that the task God has set before you is too much for you, or you feel inadequate or unworthy, remember John the Baptist. Remember that if we waited to do God's work until we felt worthy, no good deeds would ever get done. So go ahead and do what God is calling you to do, whether you feel up to it or not. Because when unworthy people do the will of God anyway, God is present. And miracles happen.