

Baptism of Our Lord, 2022

Jesus introduced a new understanding of God.

Before Jesus, God was seen as a severe parent who ranked God's children according to their ability to follow what often seems like arbitrary rules.

This was a petty God whose love was conditional.

It must be purchased with great effort.

This was God as the egoistic parent.

For such parents, the child is a mere reflection of them.

They are more concerned about how others see them than they are about the child's need for dependable, unwavering love.

When this is then projected onto God, we are seen as needing to prove ourselves to God through obedience to rules.

Religion of this type emphasizes our inadequacy, as if God created us as imperfect beings and is now angry at us because we are imperfect.

Sadly, people who had parents whose love was conditional, who made them feel like they were only as good as they were at appeasing their parents' egos, feel very comfortable with such an image of God.

By contrast, the God of Jesus is a joyful being whose love is freely given, whose mercy is great, who cares about our well being and not just about what we can do for God.

An all-powerful God, after all, really does not *need* anything from us.

Religion is not about appeasing God, but about changing the hearts of people, opening them up so that they can see others as mutually dependent brothers and sisters, as beautiful, creative people with gifts and abilities rather than as competitors who occupy a level in some sort of preferential hierarchy.

In this vision, God delights in our very being and is saddened when we cannot do the same.

God thrills at the various ways we experiment with the gifts that God has given us.

Did you start a rock band in high school?

You made God smile.

Do you build birdhouses?

You bring God joy.

Do you listen to others carefully?

You warm God's heart.

I watched a YouTube video of trampoline athletes at the last Olympics.

I was impressed with how passionately they were exploring the physical capacities God had given them and I thought, "They cause God delight."

The only thing that causes God greater joy than our exploration of what God has given us is when we put that to use in the service of the whole.

Life is not about finding ways to be loved more by God (since we will never be loved any more than we already are), but about joyfully being together and caring for one another and the creation.

The community of the church should be guided by this second vision, the God of Jesus. It is to be a place where it is safe to be oneself, safe to explore, safe to question, safe to laugh, safe to cry.

Of course churches also attract people who worship the other God, the God of the pharisees and scribes, the God whose love must be earned.

They seek to use the church and God to justify their own painful experiences, and by doing so, they spread that pain to others.

The God of Jesus is the undoing of this transactional God of rewards and retribution. It is for us to make clear the real values of the church, the real nature of God.

God created all kinds of people; God loves all kinds of people.

If you are a quiet person, then live out that quietness with abandon.

Have fun doing things behind the scenes and smile when you see the effect.

If you have a big personality, let it shine!

Find ways of being you that contribute to the well being of the whole and feel the joy that that produces.

It is into such a community of love and affirmation that baptism is the entrance.

It is an initiation rite.

In baptism, we are announcing, "I have had a change of heart."

I no longer want to live in joyless attempts to prove myself better than others.

I no longer want to malign God, who is love, by suggesting that God is an emotional manipulator.

As a result of this change of heart, I want to join with others who have had a similar change of heart.

I want to live in joyful community, to play together as we each explore our own gifts and how they can be useful.

Those who see God as a demanding, capricious parent that doles out favors to those who please God misunderstand baptism as another way of appeasing or flattering God in order to gain a kind of magic protection.

In fact, they reduce the loving, playful give and take between us and our creator to a quid pro quo transaction.

Baptism is not magic.

The Eucharist is not magic.

It is a joyful celebration of what already is, of God within us, of a God who, through the host, feeds us with Godself rather than demanding that we feed God.

When we baptize a child, the parents are promising to bring that child up in the joyful community of faith.

They are swearing to love that child and to teach it what it means to love others.

Love is honest and open.

It tells the truth, but without animosity or rejection.

It celebrates what *is* rather than bemoans what is not.

In baptism, we as a community are making promises to one another and especially to the parents and child.

We are promising to love that child and not to treat it as a means to an end.

We are promising to provide a safe environment in which that child can explore.

We are pledging to support the parents on their journey.

We are extending the assurance of grace and forgiveness when, like all of us at times, they try something that fails, when they are confronted with the reality that they are not God.

It is at those moments that we can assure them, *neither are we*, but we are here for you.

Baptism is not about magic; it is about relationships, relationships lived out in humility, honesty, and the assurance of God's unalterable love.