

COME ON IN; THE WATER IS FINE
REVEREND MARY MARPLE THIES
January 8, 2023

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

One morning not long ago, in the course of less than an hour, I heard or read four stories about lonely people. The first was about a woman who had \$16,000 of debt that she could not pay. The second was about parents of children who were having difficulty learning to read. The third was about a woman who was struggling to learn how to establish healthy emotional boundaries. And the last was a man talking about his experience of attempting suicide. Four very different people and circumstances, but every one of them spoke of how they felt isolated and alone, believing that no one else was facing similar difficulties and that no one could possibly understand what they were going through or could help.

It struck me as odd at the time that, in such a short period of time, these widely divergent people should speak of experiencing loneliness. I thought it must be some kind of coincidence. Then, about a month later, I listened to an interview with Vivek Murthy, who served as Surgeon General under President Obama. When Dr. Murthy assumed his office in 2017, he decided to go on a listening tour all across America to determine what was ailing Americans. He had anticipated that people would speak about drug addiction or mental illness or violence, and they did talk about those things, but what he began to notice was that behind those concerns were stories of loneliness and experiences of deeper emotional pain. He also noticed that when he gave a talk about e-cigarettes or the opioid epidemic or some other medical issue, if he mentioned something in passing about loneliness, after the presentation, that was only thing people wanted to talk about. Whether they were mayors of big cities or people in small communities, young, old or in between, people of all kinds—they only wanted to talk him about loneliness.

So Dr. Murthy ended up researching loneliness and writing a book. He found that somewhere around 20% of adults in the US who took the surveys, said they were struggling with loneliness. That is a huge number. It is more than the number of adults who have diabetes or smoke cigarettes, and those are just the number of people willing to admit to the struggle with loneliness. Dr. Murthy thinks the actual number may be higher.¹

What Dr. Murthy's research suggests to me is that it was not a fluke that I heard so many stories about people feeling alone. All of which got me thinking about this

story of Jesus' baptism. It may seem to you to be an odd connection, but hang in there with me for a bit and maybe you too will recognize the connection.

An account of Jesus' baptism is offered by three of the gospel writers, Matthew, which we read this morning; Mark and Luke. Mark's telling is straight-forward and brief—Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist.ⁱⁱ Luke tells us Jesus was baptized, but only implies that it was John who administered the water.ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew adds some detail by giving us the exchange between John the Baptist and Jesus about John's unworthiness to baptize Jesus. In John's gospel, we are only given John the Baptist's testimony that he saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus but we are never told that John baptized Jesus or even that he was baptized.^{iv} Scholars tell us that these variations are a reflection of the concern that the early church had about Jesus being baptized.

You may recall that John the Baptist, the fiery, camel's-hair-wearing, locust-eating prophet, came preaching repentance. He proclaimed that the kingdom of heaven was near and people must repent of their sins if they had any hope of surviving God's judgment. In contrast, in his ministry, death and resurrection, Jesus proclaimed a very different message than John's. His coming was the initiation of God's reign of love and righteousness. Jesus' early followers also came to believe that Jesus himself was without sin and therefore had no need to repent. These understandings of God's good and gracious reign and of Jesus' own purity, caused them to be uneasy about why it was necessary for him to be baptized, especially by a human being who, by definition, was sinful himself. That concern is reflected in John's own words of his unworthiness. So, why? Why did Jesus need to undergo John's baptism?

The answer lies in Jesus' reassurance to John—"It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."^v Now righteousness in scripture is about being in right relationship with God, being made right with God. It is about being able to be in a loving, obedient relationship with God. When Jesus was baptized, he did so in obedience to God because God sent Jesus to be with us, in the midst of our sin, in our need for forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus came to be with us in our messy, imperfect, lonely lives and his baptism was a sign of that. It was a visible act of his solidarity with humankind, a sign that God's Word has become flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.^{vi} Jesus' baptism is the sign of a new community in which Jesus and we ordinary humans are connected and we join him as children of God, marked as siblings of Christ. It didn't matter that it seemed odd for Jesus to be baptized by John because it was what God wanted him to do in order to bring us together with him.

Which, at last, brings us to this problem of loneliness. Dr. Murthy observes that in our very individualistic society, loneliness is an issue because our social connections are frayed. Our ability to build community is shaky. God knows that we humans need community. Right after creating Adam, God observed, “It is not good that the human should be alone. I will make him a partner.” We are created as beings who need others. That need is why we collaborate, communicate, support and help one another.

In baptism we are joined into community with God and with each other. When we witness an infant being baptized, we claim that the child is sealed as God’s own and marked as Christ’s own forever, that the child is saved. We also welcome that child into the community of faith. He or she becomes part of the family, we are not saved singly but joined as siblings in Christ. Baptism at whatever age initiates the double journey into our life with God and life as part of the body of Christ.

It is easy to be a little distracted by the sweetness of the child and forget about the power of the act that is performed. So I want to share a story about a baptism to remind us of the potency of the sacrament by the work of God’s Spirit and the community that it creates. The story—actually it is a testimony—is told by a woman named Nanette Sawyer about her own baptism.

Her church was preparing to celebrate a reaffirmation of baptismal vows, something we will be doing in a few moments. Members were encouraged to track down stories of their own baptisms, but when Nanette called her mother, she discovered that she had never been baptized. Age 37 and never baptized. So she decided to be baptized on the evening before Easter and she asked that it happen by having a pitcher of water poured over her head. No sprinkling or just a few handfuls of water, she wanted a dousing. So they brought a kiddie pool into the sanctuary and when the time came, Nanette stepped into the pool. First came the splash for the Creator and the water trickled down her face. Then a splash for the Son and the water began to soak into her clothes. Finally the splash for the Holy Spirit, which turned out to be more than a splash. All the water left in the pitcher was poured out, gushing over her face, into her mouth, flattening her hair and running over her shoulders. At one point, she thought she might drown, but finally the water stopped. And now since this is Nanette’s story, I leave it to her to tell the rest.

“It was my turn to sing, as was the tradition in our church. Everyone who was old enough to sing at his or her baptism sang, “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus.” I began to sing. As I looked out at the faces of those who had welcomed and loved me to this moment, I knew that I was being embraced into community—not only into this

community, but also into a larger community of faith, one that stretched back into history and into the future.

“As I sang I looked up toward the vaulted ceiling of the church and thought of the openness and immensity of God. I was overcome by the magnitude of what was happening. My voice began to tremble and crack as I sang.

“The congregation was right there. The people began to hum when my voice grew weak. They came in under me, lifting me up and supporting me. I felt as if they had physically grabbed my elbows and put pillows around me to keep me from falling. I began to cry and my voice broke. Again the community was there to put words to the humming and to my crying. ‘We have decided to follow Jesus, we have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back.’

“They sang for me for when I couldn’t sing. They sang when I felt overwhelmed by my own smallness and the vastness of God. They sang when I felt daunted by the task of following Jesus. They sang when my sense of aloneness was broken in the midst of their communal presence. They sang while I healed, and after a while I could sing again. That is what we do for each other. That is what it means to be the body of Christ and baptized into it by the Holy Spirit of a Creator God. We sing for each other.”^{vii}

When Jesus was baptized, he entered into our human condition, taking the first step toward creating the community we call church. We are not alone, because Jesus is with us, beside us in every situation and circumstance. We are not alone, because he is manifest in this community that is the body of Christ. When we can’t sing for ourselves, when we have trouble saying “I believe,” when life threatens to drown us, then we sing for each other, we say “I believe” for each other, we pray for each other, we hold up one another. We are not alone, for we are the body of Christ and baptized into it by the Spirit of our loving God.

ⁱ An interview with Dr. Murthy by Kate Bowler, <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/vivek-murthy-the-loneliness-epidemic/>.

ⁱⁱ Mark 1:9-11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 3:21-23.

^{iv} John 1:29-34.

^v Matthew 3:15.

^{vi} John 1:14, *The Message*.

^{vii} Nanette Sawyer, “Living by the Word,” *Christian Century*, June 14, 2011, p. 20.