

Last week, I got an e-mail from one of the people that presented me for ordination almost 30 years ago. His name is Bob Adams; he's a retired priest living in Klamath Falls, Oregon and he checks in, occasionally.

I tell stories about him. He taught a lot of people about ministry. As a matter of fact, several years ago, I learned from Nedi Rivera that we both had him as a supervisor during our training. He was the director of an alcoholism treatment center I worked in when I was going to school in Berkeley. That was a really hard time, for me because I had these three therapy groups that were quite hostile, toward me. Years later he told me that he *deliberately* selected folks who had been abused by organized religion to be part of my groups.. Doesn't sound like much, but after a few months, of turnover, you end up with some REALLY difficult folks and a really bizarre group. And of course, learning about that stuff up close and personal made me a very careful pastor.. He still laughs about watching me struggle.. And I still grudgingly admit that it was one of the formative parts of my ministry..

Anyway, Bob was (and still is) for lack of a better word, eccentric. Back in those days, sometimes it looked like he dressed himself right out of a dumpster, except, of course, he always wore a clerical collar. Bob was also the chaplain for the San Francisco Jail System, and I recall one time I went with him to observe at an AA Meeting in a minimum security lockup. It was an experimental place where they let people out for work, but then they were locked up at nights and on weekends. They do that around here, as a matter of course, now.

We got there early, and I helped him to set up and guys started to trickle in and sit at a big table. Bob was sitting at the head of the table, looking like he had slept in his clothes, except he had a clerical collar on. -- I sat about halfway down the table from Bob. The chairs began to fill up with folks who looked like they had just come from work. And this fellow sitting next to me -- he was probably a few years younger than me -- nudged me with his elbow and asked me if I had a cigarette -- I told him no. Then he leaned over and whispered to me that he had scored some really good grass at work that day, and did I want to buy some? Again, I said no. Then he leaned over and said, "I'm here for writing bad checks; what are you in for?" And I didn't really have a good answer for that one. As a matter of fact, I was speechless.

I had been mistaken for a sinner, when I hadn't done anything wrong.

It wasn't that I disliked sinners. After all, I was going to seminary, for crying out loud.. I always went out of my way to be helpful and all that. I about fell off my chair because I had been mistaken for one of the weak or dishonest or severely addicted people whose bad decisions had derailed their lives and ended them up in a place where they were locked up at night and on the weekends. Mistaken for one of "them..."

I thought it would be obvious to all that I was a seminarian -- in the ordination process -- that I was just there to help the priest (*not exactly someone you'd want to be seen with EITHER, when*

you stop to think about it..) The fact that I was just a visitor to the jail and not a resident was something I thought plain enough that anyone could see. I was mistaken.

An opposite kind of thing happened the day that Jesus showed up at the Jordan to be baptized by John. The place was teeming with sinners -- faulty, sorry, guilty human beings who hoped that John could clean them up and turn their lives around. If you have ever read the arrest record in the newspaper then you know the kinds of things most of them were guilty of -- drunk driving, bad checks, petty larceny, assault. Some were notorious sinners, and some were there for crimes of the heart known only to themselves, but none of them had illusions of their own innocence, They had come to be cleaned. They knew they were not clean.

Then Jesus showed up and got baptised with them..

What was he doing in that crowd of sinners, looking and acting like one of them? What did he have to be sorry about? And why was God's Beloved submitting himself to a scruffy character like John?

Well:

The Church has never been comfortable with the baptism of Jesus. Compare the accounts of it in each of the four gospels and you can't miss the unease of the authors. Today, Mark, of course, just **starts** with the Baptism... Matthew elaborates on Mark's story by adding; that John tried to talk Jesus out of being baptized, and they do the little dance we read where John says that he actually should be baptised by Jesus... and Luke will not even come out and say it was John who did it. In the fourth Gospel, John bears witness that he saw the Spirit descend like a dove upon Jesus, but he does not mention anything about a baptism at all. Scholars say that all this embarrassment and dissembling is probably pretty good proof that Jesus really **was** baptized by John.

Now, if Jesus had listened to his public relations people, he would have been more like what I wanted to be: a friend to sinners, a kind and patient and loving helper, but never mistaken for one of them. His handlers would never, ever have allowed him to be baptized. He could have stood on shore and offered words of encouragement to those going into the water, yes. He could have held out his hand to those who struggled out of the river in their heavy wet clothes, yes. But he could not under any circumstances have gone into the water himself, unless it was to tap John on the shoulder and say, "*Hey, John, go rest. I'll take over for a while.*" Even if he were innocent, even if his intentions were nothing but good, it was ruinous to his reputation. Who was going to believe that he was there just because he cared about those people and refused to separate himself from them? Gossip being what it was, who was not going to conclude that he had just a few teeny weeny things to get off his conscience before he went in to public ministry?

You see the problem. We spend a lot of time in the Church talking about God's love for sinners but we go to a lot of trouble not to be mistaken for one of them. Guilt by association

and all that. Only Jesus our leader and our Lord did not seem to be concerned about that. In him, God's being-with-us included God's being in the river with us - being in the flesh with us – in the sorrow of repentance and the joy of new life with us. So what if he didn't have anything of his own to be sorry about?

When we confess our sins, here, we do not simply confess our own personal sins. We kneel and talk to God about the sins of all humankind -- about all the things we, as a people, have done and failed to do -- about all the ways we have fled from the love of God because we are afraid to be seen, known, and changed.

And when we celebrate the gift of new life here, we do not simply do it for ourselves. We say our alleluias on behalf of all those who have discovered hope in the midst of despair, light in the midst of darkness life in the midst of death. Nothing we do here is a private matter between us and God. Like Jesus in the river this is something we do in union -- in communion with all humankind.

Whenever we welcome new members into the household of God, we begin with the baptismal covenant which to my way of thinking articulates the heart of our faith. We say it with them, so we all remember what is expected of us: To believe in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; to take our places at God's table and grow strong on God's food; never to give up on ourselves, but always --in what we say and what we do -- to proclaim the good news that God has come among us in the flesh. Then we invite the newcomers to step into the river with Jesus, so that they are with us. All of us: -- the well ones and the hurt ones, the brave ones and the weak ones, the successful ones and the ones who cannot seem to get it together. All of us.

All of us who have gone before them have done the same thing. Whether we were carried in our mother's arms or arrived under our own steam, all of us got into the river with Jesus and all his flawed kin.

There is not a chance we will be mistaken for one of them. Because we **are** them -- thanks be to God -- as they are us: marked as Christ's own forever.

Amen