

St. Paul's Church, Healdsburg
The Reverend Sally Hanes Hubbell
January 11, 2015

The First Sunday after the Epiphany, The Baptism of Our Lord
Texts: Genesis 1:1-5 Psalm 29 Acts 19:1-7 Mark 1:4-11

I received as a Christmas gift Anne Lamott's new book called Small Victories. If you aren't familiar with Anne Lamott, she is a Presbyterian author, former addict, brutally honest, often funny Christian counter-culture spokesperson. I highly recommend anything she's written.

Small Victories is a collection of essays about the challenges and triumphs of life, and about what is good and redemptive about the challenges life inevitably throws our way when we face them with honesty, courage and hearts that are open to love.

In her essay entitled "Sustenance," she writes about her family: *"My parents were about the pursuit of the so-called good life. When they fell in love after World War II, it was as intellectuals. This meant that you went out with other couples like you—good-looking, highly educated, and ironic folks who listened to Coltrane and Miles Davis, and raised their kids to be extremely high achievers, drank a lot of wine, passed along great books, knew about the latest poets, and cooked Julia Child's recipes and cutting-edge ethnic food."*

She has some good memories, lovingly told about eating figs with her father, and about her mothers' adventurousness in the kitchen. But she also says that despite the outward quality of life in her family in terms of the food they ate and the books they read, there was constant tension created by her parent's unhappy marriage. She describes their typical experience around the dinner table, *"It was The Joy Cooking meets Harold Pinter."* The food was, *"easy on the taste buds but hard to swallow, because it came at such a cost: a lump in the throat, anxiety in our bellies."*

The problem, Lamott writes, came from *"what didn't happen: They were not able to take their pleasures, their love of their children, out to the next concentric circle, where something bigger awaited."* As a consequence, She grew up in a home with a profound sense of disconnection and spiritual deadness.

But as is the case with most children (thank God) she was able to find what she needed outside of her nuclear family. *"I found the spiritual food for which I longed as a child in the families of my two best friends. One was Catholic and lived down the block. The Catholics said grace before serving up aggressively modest fare—English muffin pizzas, tuna noodle casserole, fish sticks. The parents seemed to enjoy each other's company: what a concept. Sometimes they yelled at each other and then later hugged and kissed in the kitchen—oh my God. It had never crossed my mind that peace could be found in full expression, in yelling and weepy embraces.*

"I also loved to eat with—and be with—a Christian Science family, who did not yell but read the Bible and Mrs. Eddy together. When I was at their house, we prayed, eyes closed, breathing deeply. In the silence you could feel and hear your own breath in your nostrils, and that could be both relaxing and scary, like having a car wash in your head.....The parents did not yell or kiss as much as the Catholics, but I felt

enveloped by their friendly confidence of their faith, and I was sad each time I was remanded to the spiritual anorexia at my house."

I've been thinking about families because today is a Baptism Sunday. Today we are baptizing Andy Hiles, and it's special for all of the reasons that every baptism is special – because it's about family. It's about Andy being adopted today into the family of God as God's own beloved child, and it's also about his being received into this family, this church family of St. Paul's. Because Andy is an adult, there is an important way in which he is adopting us as well! He is choosing to accept his adoption in a way that doesn't happen when we baptize Children, and that's a beautiful thing. He is coming up to the baptismal font this morning in a very conscientious and intentional way.

All baptisms are about family, and Andy's especially so because of the family that he brings with him. Standing up here with him as his sponsors (or Godparents) will be not only his parents, but also his son. There will be three generations of Hiles here and Andy will be sandwiched in the middle of them. The service of baptism is often a gathering place for biological families as they celebrate being a part of the larger family of the church, and this one is no different. Except what seems especially lovely to me about our baptism today is that instead of Andy being swept up at the tail end of generations of family tradition that result in the youngest members being carried to the font in one of those beautiful white gowns that matter to the wearer only in so far as they are uncomfortable, Andy is in effect bringing the generations of his family up to the font. He's the leader of the pack, so to speak.

Today is the feast of the Baptism of Our Lord – the first Sunday after the Epiphany in which the adult Jesus starts to get down to business as the Messiah. The first thing he does is go down to the Jordan River and pay his cousin John a call. John has already been baptizing people for some time and has quite a following, but Jesus will be different. John of course knows this, because in our Gospel lesson for this morning, he tells everyone, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.... I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

But we have to ask, what does that mean to be baptized with the Holy Spirit, and how is it different than being baptized simply with water for the purpose of repentance?

In our lesson from Acts for this morning, when the apostles are talking to the new church in Ephesus, they make a clear distinction between John's baptism and what baptism becomes later, after Jesus becomes part of it. Paul says, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." When they heard this, those new Christians were baptized again "in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied." I know for us Episcopalians, it would seem alarming, if not actually frightening, to speak in tongues around the Baptismal font. That's more pressure for a spiritual transformation than I want Andy or any of us to feel this morning! (Andy, if you do feel the spirit move you, just let it flow – we would get over our discomfort and welcome any utterance by the Holy Spirit in our midst!) But in all seriousness, with

God all things are possible, and speaking in tongues is no exception. The lesson from scripture is that we should be ready for anything.

But let's get back to this question, what changes with baptism after Jesus himself is baptized? According to our Gospel lesson, John has been "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." And then along comes Jesus, the one whom John has been waiting for since he first leapt in his mother's womb when Mary visited her cousin some thirty years earlier. Mark's version of this story is the briefest of all the Gospels, and it doesn't record John's alarm at being asked to baptize Jesus, when it should be the other way around – he simply does it, and as Jesus is coming out of the water, the heavens are "torn apart and the Spirit" descends "like a dove" upon Jesus. And a voice comes from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus' baptism is sort of his official anointing as the son of God. This is different than the Epiphany, when the wise men and all of the people in the stable see and recognize the baby Jesus as the Messiah and King of the Jews. Although I can imagine that this is an "epiphany moment" for some who see it, what's happening at Jesus' Baptism with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him, is a family moment of the Holy Trinity, for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It's a family reunion, just as the occasion of baptisms so often are, as is happily the case today.

That same coming together of the family of God at Jesus' baptism is what happens at our Baptism as well. We may not be the son of God in the same way that Jesus is, but through our baptism we are adopted as God's own children. In baptism we recognize that we are chosen by God in a way that supersedes and transforms our biological families, and gives us a whole new family made up of beloved, adopted, chosen members of the household of God. When we are baptized into Jesus' baptism, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the whole family of God becomes our family too. And in the process we become family to one another.

Remember that passage I read from Anne Lamott, in which she laments that within her biological family her parent's, "were not able to take their pleasures, their love of their children, out to the next concentric circle, where something bigger awaited." Well, what we're doing today, is taking something good – a lovely and a loving family – and we're taking it out to the next concentric circle into something bigger, where God himself and all the rest of us await.