

St. John the Baptist and St. Nicholas: The Sainly Odd Couple

Sunday, December 5, 2010
Advent II, Year A
Matthew 3:1-12
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An amazing art exhibition titled, "Treasurers of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe" is currently being displayed at the Cleveland Museum of Art. I spent a lovely two hours last week, wondering as I wandered through this exquisite collection of reliquaries.

For those unfamiliar with the term, a reliquary is a container for relics, which are the physical remains of saints, such as body parts, bones, pieces of clothing, or some object associated with saints and other religious figures. A saint's body, or a part of a saint's body such as an arm or a finger, is a relic, but so is an object that a saint touched during his or her lifetime. Even an object brought into contact with the body of a saint after his or her death, like a piece of cloth or a vial of oil, assumes the status of a relic.

The veneration of holy women and men as role models of faithful living arose in early Christianity and reached a crescendo in medieval Europe. One way of commemorating these saints was to pay homage to their relics, a term that literally means "left behind." The acquisition of saint's relics and encasing them for devotional purposes became cultic in the Christian faith of that time.

Artists who designed the reliquaries sought to bridge the gap between heaven and earth by creating special containers for this holy matter. Nested within these special vessels, relics connected the Christian faithful with sacred places and people. Frequently covered in precious metals and encrusted with gems, these containers command one's attention. While the authenticity of what the reliquary contains is often debatable, they are without a doubt inspiring, exquisite objects of art for both the faithful and the skeptical.

On this, the second Sunday of Advent, two saints with relics in the CMA exhibit run into each other. They are saints who we might not normally think of as having much in common, but they do. The first saint is John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, figures prominently in our Gospel reading today where we hear him preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah. Today is also the eve of the feast of the second, St. Nicholas, the fourth century Bishop of Myra, Turkey, and in a convoluted way, the forerunner of Santa Claus.

Now initially the idea of these two saints being conjoined in some way is, well, odd. We have this image of John wearing camels' hair with a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey. We have another of Nicholas in a red cope wearing a miter, eating, well, probably some Turkish version of cookies and milk. What do these two seemingly disparate men have in common? Joining them together creates some weird saintly version of The Odd Couple. In fact imagining John and Nicholas together makes Felix and Oscar's coupling appear downright normal. Yet John and Nicholas have much more in common than initially meets the eye.

For starters they meet together in the "Treasurers of Heaven" exhibit where a reliquary containing a tooth of St. John the Baptist sits but a few feet away from a reliquary containing a remnant of St. Nicholas' clothing. Now many people will be skeptical about the authenticity of this actually being John's tooth. I for one, stood in front of this reliquary wondering if the tooth was extracted post-mortem or during dental work. (The mind can do funny things when it observes art.) But I suspect many people who see the exhibit will wonder much more about the authenticity of Nicholas' clothing, which was distinctly – and most likely for many, disappointingly – not a pointy cap made of red velvet with white fur trim. There wasn't even a pom-pom!

But more importantly than cohabitating in this exhibit, Nicholas and John meet as two extraordinary role models of faithful living.

We live in a time of growing weariness and diminishing hopefulness for our lives and our culture. In these gloomy, dark circumstances it is no small thing to have John and Nicholas stand as pillars of light and hope in our darkness.

This morning in our Collect we prayed, "Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins..."

The question for many is: When a prophet's message sounds forbidding, can we heed their warnings? A post by a clergy colleague on Facebook this past week bemoaned that the prophets were always preaching gloomy news. Frankly I think it just seems that way because of how the lectionary is edited. We get large doses of the prophets' dire gloom and doom predictions beginning in mid-November and in the weeks leading up to Christmas. This is intentional; a reminder that Advent is a season of preparation and of cleansing our lives of those things that prevent us from being ready for that unexpected moment when Christ will come.

But saints and prophets don't just denounce against bad behavior, they also summon us to what we ought to do, they remind us of our higher values. They challenge us to, as the Marine Corps slogan says, "Be all that you can be." Prophets and saints have no greater desire than to prepare our lives for the One who is to come.

People who venerate relics understand this concept very well. By coming into contact with a saint's relic, or even by just viewing them, the hope is that some of the higher qualities – the holiness, if you will – of the saint will rub off onto the person and that their life will be changed for the better.

John and Nicholas are perfect examples of this. Those who venerate their relics have done so because they desire some small portion for themselves of what these two men held up in their lives as righteous behavior.

In John's time people flocked to him as he baptized in the wilderness because they were disgusted with the corruption and hypocrisy of institutional religion and government. His message was one of restoring ethical and moral behavior among people so they would be prepared for the Messiah; the one who would restore the world to the way God intended it to be. In their weariness and sense of hopelessness people didn't see John's hard message – never mind his bizarre clothing and diet – as off-putting, but rather they found it hope-filled.

In John they heard the good news that redemption from the malaise that infected their society was coming in Jesus. And not only was it coming, it was very near. His message of calling people to a serious amendment of life so to achieve a new and better way of life for all people, led them to the healing waters of baptism. Being in the presence of John and having him touch them as they were baptized transformed people's lives; it changed them. Imagine how powerfully today's Gospel story sounded to those ears that heard it centuries later and who believed that even by viewing or touching a reliquary containing his tooth they might be somehow connected to John and also be changed for the better?

Nicholas was born to wealthy parents, who raised him to be a devout Christian. His parents died in an epidemic while Nicholas was still young. Obeying Jesus' words to "sell what you own and give the money to the poor," Nicholas used his whole inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering. He dedicated his life to serving God and was made Bishop of Myra while still a young man. Bishop Nicholas became known throughout the land for his generosity to those in need, his love and compassion for children, his concern for sailors and ships and his protection of the most vulnerable in society.

At his own death he was buried in his cathedral in Myra. In the 11th century, when Venice was a powerful city-state, sailors from that city raided Nicholas' tomb and took his relics back to Bari, Italy. His basilica in Bari became one of the great pilgrimage destinations in medieval Europe. People flocked to his entombed relics because they believed that they would not only be healed of their ills, but also obtain some small portion of Nicholas' higher ideals.

In the CMA exhibit there is a painting entitled, "The Crippled and Sick Cured at the Tomb of St. Nicholas." It was painted by the artist Gentile da Fabriano (ca. 1370–1427). The painting depicts Nicholas tomb in Bari. On the right side of the painting is a stream of pilgrims, many who are lame or clearly ill, wending their way in a line for an opportunity to touch the tomb. One man is even carried on a litter by friends, evoking Matthew's gospel story of the paralytic man lowered through the roof to be touched and healed by Jesus. On the left side, leaving the tomb, is a man who is carrying his crutches, clearly healed from his malady.

Through his relics Nicholas touched people and it brought healing and wholeness to those who were inspired by his life of compassion and who desired a wee bit of that for themselves.

My friends, we desperately need John's hope-filled message of an approaching new life in the messiah; a hope that cleanses us of the hopelessness we currently feel from our current societal malaise. We need the touch of his message to lead ethical and moral lives so we can be encouraged to demand reform from the corruption that fills our failing institutions of government, business and religion.

We fervently need to be touched by Nicholas' example of care and compassion for the weakest and most vulnerable in the world. We need to metaphorically touch the relics of his life and be healed from many of our ills, the least not being the maddening Christmas commercialism that sickens us. We need to incarnate St. Nicholas' message, rather than venerate his heir Santa Claus, whose message of "Buy, buy, buy," only makes us sicker.

Through the witness of their lives these two saints stand together in this season of Advent pointing us to a better way of life.

St. John the Baptist and St. Nicholas of Myra: maybe not such an odd couple after all. May we venerate their holy lives and be touched by their grace, so that we may heed their warnings, forsaking our sins and be healed.

Now that would really be a Christmas present worth asking Santa Baby to leave under the tree!

Amen.