

**Sermon: “Shouldn’t You Be Doing This?”**

**Sunday, January 9, 2011**

**The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector**

**Christ Church, Shaker Heights**

**Epiphany I, Year A: Matthew 3:13-17**

There recently was an amusing television commercial that was sponsored by the investment company of Edward Jones. In the ad a doctor dressed in scrubs is speaking on the telephone. He’s giving instructions on where to make a surgical incision. The scene suddenly switches to the other end of the phone. A man with a worried look on his face is standing in his kitchen with his tee shirt held up around his abdomen. In his hand he is holding a household knife, asking “shouldn’t you be doing this?”

Edward Jones clearly marketed this commercial with an eye toward investors with money, but who may not have had the market savvy to do so wisely. Yet coming in the midst of last year’s national health care debate, the commercial also had a bittersweet sub-text. It reminded me of just how many Americans without health insurance are compelled to rely on their own devices for whatever rudimentary health care they can administer to themselves when they are ill. No, they shouldn’t be doing that, but they have no choice.

This commercial came to mind again this week as I read the story of the baptism of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel.

“Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” I picture John standing waist deep in the river with Jesus, a puzzled look on his face saying, “shouldn’t you be doing this?”

Christians have struggled with the baptism of Jesus, wondering why Jesus needed to be baptized at all. Clearly baptism was for sinners. In the gospel of Mark we read that John “appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” If Jesus is who we believe he is – the sinless Son of God - than he did not stand in need of either repentance or forgiveness. John gets this when he hears Jesus’ unusual request to him to be baptized. It was John’s conviction that it was he who needed what Jesus could give, not Jesus who needed what he could give. He understands that Jesus is the sinless one and that if anything it is he, John – a sinful human being – who needs to be baptized by Jesus. It is what prompts him to say to Jesus, “shouldn’t you be doing this?” Well, he didn’t say that verbatim, but he should have!

Preachers and theologians have offered numerous reasons why Jesus asked John to baptize him. Some suggest that it was because Jesus wanted to please his mother and brothers. According to one non-canonical source, Mary and her other sons are going off to see John to be baptized. They urge Jesus to come along, but he questions why he should go with them. His family override his objections and compel him to accompany them. As family pressure is a common reason for parents in the 21st century to have their children baptized, this is not an unreasonable premise.

Others speculate that Jesus needed some big, splashy, (pun intended) event to inaugurate his public ministry. What better way to have people take notice of Jesus and his radical Kingdom of God message, then for him to associate himself with his quirky, off-beat cousin. Remember John was a man who wore animal skins, ate locusts, called the establishment folks vipers and ran around the desert yelling about the coming messiah? It doesn't get much more quirky or off-beat than that!

But I have another theory as to why the sinless Jesus had John baptize him; another possible answer to John's query of, "shouldn't you be doing this?"

This past Sunday the New York Times op-ed writer Nicholas Kristof wrote a column titled "Equality, a True Soul Food." Kristof wrote about a new study by two British epidemiologists named Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett who have written a book called, "The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger." In their book these scientists argue that, "gross inequality [in a society] tears at the human psyche, creating anxiety, distrust and an array of mental and physical ailments." Pickett and Wilkinson cite mountains of data to support this premise. Kristof writes, "the heart of their argument is that humans are social animals and that in highly unequal societies those at the bottom suffer a range of pathologies."

They cite a British study of civil servants that showed people with low status jobs were much more likely to die of cancer, heart disease, suicide and had over-all substantially worse health issues than those who held positions in the middle or upper status range.

Another study examined rich countries. It found that those countries which have greater levels of inequality among its citizens have dramatically more mental illness, infant mortality, obesity, high school dropouts and teenage pregnancy to name but a few social ailments.

The United States is a very rich country, yet one with huge inequalities among its citizenry. The top 1% of our people holds a greater collective wealth than the bottom 90%. We as a nation suffer an abundance of the ailments that Pickett and Wilkinson cite. In comparison, Sweden and the Netherlands are also very rich countries but with significantly less inequality among their citizens. The more egalitarian societal structure

of both these nations results in substantially lower incidences of the social ills that inequality breeds in the United States.

Kristof then asks, “ Why is inequality so harmful?” “The Spirit Level” suggests that inequality undermines social trust and community life, corroding societies as a whole. Inequality also leads to heightened stress and stress leads to the release of the harmful hormone cortisol as well as the accumulation of fat in our bodies, both of which contribute to serious physical ailments.”

Pickett and Wilkinson conclude that, “inequality is divisive, and even small differences seem to make an important difference. They suggest that it is not just the poor who benefit from the social cohesion that comes with equality, but the entire society.

The critical need for equality among human beings for their health and well-being is of course the boilerplate message of the Kingdom of God which Jesus inaugurates with his baptism. Unlike us, God in Jesus does not need an extensive study to know that inequality among human beings is divisive and harmful to humans: body and soul. God did not create us to be unequal with one another. The world and her resources do not exist to benefit a small minority of well to do folks while the majority struggle to get by, if not live in abject poverty. Hunger, homelessness, lack of adequate health care, not having potable water, bigotry toward others for who they are, disparity in educational opportunities, all these are sins of inequality that sicken peoples bodies and souls and ultimately have a detrimental impact on all of us.

Jesus insisted he be baptized by John to address these sins. It is why the sinless one was baptized by one who was a sinner; to make a radical statement about leveling the playing field between what humanity considers to be the most unequal relationship we may imagine; the one which exists between heaven and earth, the sacred and the profane. Jesus needed to be baptized by John to show how God desired that inequality to be set aside so to create a healthier relation between God and humanity. As St. Paul states in the Letter to the Philippians, “Christ Jesus, who, though in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself . . . being born into human likeness. . . and being found in human form he humbled himself

Though in the form of God, Jesus humbled himself, making himself one of us – the great equalizer - to address our sinful behavior of treating each other as unequal. Jesus emptied himself to heal the physical and soul sickness which inequality brings to humanity.

Jesus’ baptism inaugurated his public ministry by identifying with "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem." He allied himself with the faults and failures, the pains and problems, of all the broken people who had flocked to the

Jordan River. By wading into the waters with humanity he took his place beside us and among us paying absolutely no heed to any inequalities real or perceived between him and those who gathered on the rivers edge. And that includes us as well.

Jesus' baptismal solidarity with broken people, those who suffer gross inequality for whatever reason and find themselves at the bottom of the social scale, was vividly confirmed by God's affirmation and empowerment. Still wet with water after his cousin had plunged him beneath the Jordan River, Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision — the declaration of God the Father that Jesus was his beloved son, and the descent of God the Spirit in the form of a dove. The vision and the voice punctuated the baptismal event. They signaled the meaning, the message and the mission of Jesus, that by the power of the Spirit, the Son of God embodied his Father's unconditional embrace and love of all people everywhere. And in that embrace Jesus proclaimed a Kingdom of justice and righteousness for all God's children.

Jesus did this because he loved us. In that moment of his baptism, Jesus modeled a new way of life for us. In his ministry he eradicated the inequalities and differences that existed between humans, because he knew the sickness of the soul, as well as the body, that resulted from that behavior.

It is no different today than it was then. Jesus desires to be baptized in our hearts, emerging in them, yearning to heal the sin of inequality and the sickness it brings. And as he emerges we hear a voice from heaven asking us, “shouldn't you be doing this as well?

Amen.