

## **“Go Ahead ... Be A Blessing to God!”**

Matthew 3:13-17

January 13, 2008, Baptism of the Lord

Rev. Richard K. Gelson, Fairmount Presbyterian Church

I'd always suspected it. And somewhere in Greece, in 1993, some artisan of religious icons seems to have confirmed it -- John the Baptist indeed had rock star hair. This icon is amazing. Like all religious icons it is more than just artwork -- it is an entryway for prayer. You see it in black and white there on your bulletin cover, but it really needs to be viewed in color.

It is a painted depiction of the upper torso of the Baptist. Look at that long, wavy, kinda' crazy looking hair sitting on his head like a mottled raccoon cap. See how it flows down below his shoulders in almost dreadlock fashion. Even Bob Marley and Jim Morrison's famous locks pale in comparison. And the Baptist is dressed well enough to make Mr. Blackwell's best-dressed list, wearing a nice, and earthy-green colored robe, with a splash of sea-water blue around the color. Beyond his apparel, note how his eyes are clearly looking up, the way you might try to see a gnat buzzing around your eyebrows. Also note that while his body is turned to the right, his face is cocked to the left. And then there are those arms and hands. Both arms are extended out a bit, with his right palm open in a receiving posture and his left palm raised in what seems to me a welcoming gesture. Put all this together while trying to read the expression on his face ... are you getting any message?

I encourage you to sit and pray *with this* (and not *to this*) later today or sometime this week. You may be surprised to find it “speaking” to you, “reading” you in some deeply spiritual manner.

As I sat with it several times this week, I found it “saying” the same thing over and over again. It seemed to be communicating the words, “Me? For You? You've got to be kidding!”

Back to this message in a moment. First, though, I invite you to poke around your memory bank and withdraw a few reflections about a person who has been a tremendous and positive authority figure in your life. Most all of us have had someone like this at some point in our lives.

Perhaps this is someone who mentored you in school or at the workplace. Professor Donald Capps at Princeton Seminary was such a person for me while I studied there ... not just because he is a good, prolific writer of books on pastoral theology, but even more so because he wore jeans, tennis sneakers and was always available for a cup of

coffee to discuss course work or personal matters.

Perhaps it is a family member, friend or spiritual leader who taught you how to be your very best self. In my profession, I most often find how certain family members filled this role only as I meet with their family to discuss the memorial service.

As you reminisce a moment, I further invite you to consider whether or not you were ever asked to do something for this positive authority figure that you were more than happy to do. And, even though happy to do it, consider whether you felt “worthy” or “unworthy” in being called to the task. If Dr. Capps had ever asked me to write a preface for one of his books, I would have been honored and obliged to do so, while at the same time I know I would have wrestled deeply with insecurity and a sense of, “Me? For you? You’ve got to be kidding!”

Which brings me back to John the Rock Star, er, the Baptist. Maybe I’m reading into the icon instead of letting it read me as I ought, but it does seem to convey a sense of what the Baptist surely wrestled with. Along comes Jesus, the one whose sandals thongs he knew with utmost certainty he was not fit to even tie. He knew, with a soulful knowing, from the very moment he leapt in his mother Elizabeth’s womb when pregnant cousin Mary came to visit, that he was the lesser to the greater. True enough, he had been born and grown into being a great man of God, a true prophet calling for repentance of sins ... but he was not on par with the Son of God. He may well have been the return of Elijah, but, again, not the Messiah.

His entire “lesser” place in life was bent toward preparing the world for the Great One who would bless and save it. And so when the greater, Jesus, finally and fully arrived to inaugurate his ministry by asking for the lesser to bestow the blessing of baptism upon him ... it didn’t exactly add up. We hear him trying to figure it out as he says, “I am the one who needs to be baptized by you, so why do you come to me?” (Matt. 3:14, NLT). Basically, John objects! He can’t quite comprehend his being asked to bless God’s Son in this way. But Jesus replies ... “It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires.” (Matt. 3:15, NLT)

The must-be-done role-reversing requirement spoken of here is this – Jesus needed to accept the blessing of a “lesser” person in order to demonstrate exactly how God interprets greatness.

God does not interpret greatness as our lording power over people considered “the least of these” in the world, but by our humbly submitting ourselves in loving service to them. If we believe we are greater, that we are somehow better and more righteous than some person defined as less than desirable company by society, then we need to pray hard to

understand the fact that the greatest of all, God's own Son, bent down to be blessed by a crazy looking guy with wild honey and locust meat on his breath.

A fine example of what it means to show the greatness of Jesus by serving "lesser" ones in love, is a story about our 11<sup>th</sup> Chief Justice of the United States. Charles Evans Hughes was a greatly gifted and greatly privileged man. He attended private school in New York City went on to what later became Brown University; taught Japanese, Latin and calculus before attending and then graduating Washington University Law School with highest honors; became the thirty-ninth governor of New York in 1907; the forty-fourth U.S. Secretary of State in 1921; and then served as Chief Justice from 1930 to 1941. Of all his accomplishments, his power and privilege, though, it seems his heart was quite solidly centered on his identity as the great-grandson and son of Christian preachers.

This is something he reportedly demonstrated one day shortly after his arrival in Washington, D.C. to take up his Supreme Court duties. He had transferred his membership to a Baptist church where it was customary for new members to be called forward at the end of the worship service. On his day to do so, the Chief Justice was preceded by a dozen or so people who all came forward and stood on the very opposite side of the church from one other new member, an Asian laundryman delightfully named Ah Sing. No one stood with Ah Sing there in the church. Until, as you've probably figured out, Chief Justice Hughes did so. As the minister welcomed the group into the church family, he remarked, "I do not want this congregation to miss this remarkable illustration of the fact that at the Cross of Jesus Christ the ground is level."

Hughes greatness was most truly revealed in this act of lowering himself in love for a brother in Christ when most others, even and especially there in the House of God, continued to demean his worth.

By receiving baptism from the camel-haired and leather-belted John, Jesus embodied what he steadfastly preached the rest of his life – the last shall be first, the least are the greatest, and so on. He walked his talk again and again by keeping company, blessing, and no doubt feeling blessed himself by all sorts of social outcasts. Righteousness is fulfilled every time we today follow his example of submitting and serving for God's sake.

As this still fresh year further unfolds ... go ahead, bless God. Don't worry if you feel unworthy, or if it feels backwards. God blesses you ... imperfections and all ... which is good news best responded to by blessing him by doing the same for others. Amen.