

**NO COMPARISON**

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

"I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals."

*"I'm not worthy."*

I'm rather disappointed with John in this morning's reading.

I really don't like his absolute dismissal of himself.

It all goes overboard for me because he keeps repeating how he doesn't measure up.

Of course, it is Jesus he's using as a comparison, but still.

"One who is more powerful than I", is a statement I can understand and agree with.

But then he goes on: "I'm not worthy to be his lowliest servant" and

"He'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire, not just water."

And in this gospel of Luke's, we don't even get to witness John baptizing Jesus - it's just

"and Jesus had also been baptized."

I tend to get my back up when I hear so much deference, even, apparently, when it comes to the Messiah.

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"I'm not worthy." That's not a phrase that comes easily to many of our lips.

There is obviously some cultural baggage that urges me to distance myself from John's attitude of submission.

We live in a country that only 230 years ago rejected monarchy and its devotion to the accident of birth for authority. (submission to king/queen)

We were raised in a society in which, until 86 years ago, women were denied the power of their voice to vote. (submission of women to men in government)

We are a culture that celebrates a holiday to remember a man who dreamed of equality...

and who was also murdered for his beliefs and for his skin color only 38 years ago.

Even now, I face family members, political groups and church leaders who tell me I am not worthy for ministry based on my sexual orientation.

What are the forces that try to make you feel unworthy?

What are the voices, external or internal, that tell you you're not good enough,

Because of your age or looks or education or anything.

To me, it makes sense why I would balk at such overt dismissal of one's own gifts and offerings.

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And John's gifts and offerings to the community in his time and place were many.

He brought to an oppressed people the hope that the Messiah's coming was imminent.

He preached and offered practical means for individuals to live their repentance;

and he baptized all who came to turn their lives around.

In truth, John the Baptizer's greatness wasn't just confined to first century Judea. Despite his early death, he remains a prominent figure in our own faith story.

We encounter him over and over, especially this time of year.

He's the FORERUNNER, after all -

The child who leapt in Elizabeth's womb when she set eyes on her newly pregnant cousin.

Said to be the reincarnation of Elijah and the baptizer of our own proclaimed Savior,

John is pretty great, in my book.

And in my preparatory reading this week, I didn't like to focus on his self-abasement.

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I don't think I'm the only one. Maybe you don't respond as strongly as I do, but simply being justice-oriented Christians I believe many of us feel some aversion to calling anyone unworthy.

We have struggled for better lives for ourselves and others.

We continue to fight poverty, oppression, and racism through our time, money and social activism.

We claim to want to free all people from such injustices,

and yet allowing ourselves to use the language of "less than/greater than"

gives power to the idea that such inequality is acceptable or natural in some forms.

I don't want to admit to anyone that I am unworthy of Christ's calling on me. If I did, how could I *or any of us* dare to preach or even live his Good News?

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Looking back at the text, though, it's right there. Too conspicuous to disregard. Luckily, Luke provides some clue to put John's comments in perspective.

"The people were filled with expectation" of the Messiah, he says.

And so they were "questioning in their hearts" whether John might be that same Anointed One.

OF COURSE John is going to reject that notion – "No, no, I am not he. Not even close. And here's how you can tell us apart."...

--John is clarifying, in the way *he* thinks is right.

But as John himself has assured us through Luke,

he was *not* The One.

So he couldn't have gotten it all quite right.

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Yes, Jesus was everything John described and more. What John couldn't yet fathom was how Jesus would strip away that announcement of John's "unworthiness."

In coming to be baptized before the crowd, Jesus was making a statement:

"You are worthy."

Hopefully we all have experienced those moments of turnaround in our expectations of a relationship. What pops into mind are the times when one of my parents comes to me for advice or consolation. It took me by surprise the first many times; but it was so affirming, both of me as an individual, and as a sign that our relationship had grown and equalized. They're still my parents, of course, but we can come to each other as people.

Now, multiply that feeling by *enough* and you'll perceive a small part of Jesus' gift to John — and US — in his baptism.

He toppled the structures of subjugation: "better than" and "worse than."

*And this was just the beginning of his ministry.*

For this message to be in his first public appearance as Messiah, how wonderful! . . .

...How confusing.

You see, from childhood, John and all 1st Century Jews would have been conditioned to understand hierarchy.

(using hands) "One person is here and another is here — and you might be on a level with this person and this person — but, Oh it's good not to be way down there with those people."

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It was just a simple fact: If you're preparing for the King in the line of David, *absolutely* you're going to expect him to require some obeisance.

But to have him turn to you for your *water* baptism, when he will be bringing Spirit and fire?  
...You just don't figure for it.

Today we still often can't figure for it.

Like John we downplay our gifts and usefulness to Christ.

But there it is, and that's how we as Christians strive to live: Equal with one another. Equal with the calling Christ sets before us in the Gospel.

We would be remiss to try to follow John rather than Jesus' example.

Especially when Jesus' action inspires God to acknowledge him with such pleasure:

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Not until Jesus accepts the baptism by water at the hand of one who is not the One, the Son, not until that moment does the Holy Spirit descend.

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This is not a new Word. This is the same message preached throughout the year  
with echoes of Jesus washing the disciples' feet and  
charging them to do the same.

With currents of Jesus' encouragement of the youngest in his midst,  
and his calling of thieves and traitors.

Just as we are enjoined to hear again and again the story of Jesus' baptism, it is necessary that we also be reminded of what his and our baptisms mean.

*We are worthy.* And we have a mission.

If we claim, as John tried, that we are not worthy to do even the most  
menial task for Christ because we are not The One,  
then Christ's Church would be poor, indeed.

But we have gifts and we are baptized into Christ's family with all the work that that entails for those gifts.

In the face of all the work yet to be done in this world, I am encouraged when we react to these words of John's.

We recognize our worth in the eyes of Christ as we continue to  
pursue the justice that John preached by the Jordan.

And as we follow the example of Jesus in his extraordinary act of denying our lowliness,  
we also hear God's pleasure in response:

"You are my child, Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Not with pride or ego do we hear that voice.

But with the humility of knowing that our gifts are to be used for the actualization of God's realm.

And this is always the Good News.

All we do is hear it again.