

## ***Pastor's Page***

An ideal most Americans share is that we live in a land where one can get ahead by their own merits. And so I used to roll my eyes when my father through a wrench into that theory by saying: "It's not *what* you know, but *who* you know" that often gets us ahead in life. As I matured, I realized there was great truth in my father's words: that **personal relationships matter** even more than our own merits in this life.

This is the good news of today's Gospel: that *despite* our unworthiness, God chooses a personal relationship with us. **And He stops at *nothing* to be with us**, and to give us a leg up in life. Baptism by John was supposed to be a turning away from sin toward God. So why should Jesus -- who *has* no sin, and who *is* God -- *why* should He choose to be baptized? And why be baptized by one such as John who *himself* admits he's not worthy even to stoop and loosen the straps of Jesus' sandals? The answer is *love*.

It is the gracious love of God for a fallen humanity that moves *Him* to lower *Himself* into our brokenness and into our march toward death, only to raise us up into a new life -- a new *relationship* with the humble God of almighty love. *He* stooped toward *us* in the manger to be *Emmanuel*: God who is *with* us, no matter what. He stoops *again* in His baptism, *lowering* himself into the depths of the river of our sins that threaten to drown us. And He stoops yet *again*, as He willingly is stripped of basic human dignity upon the Cross.

**God stops at *nothing* to be with us.** So *why* do we turn away? Why do we choose relationships with the idols of our own pride; idols of empty pleasures; repeatedly choosing love of money, food, shopping, vacationing, partying, objectifying others for our own personal use? Why do we tear others down by our rash and hypocritical judgments, our destructive gossip, our exclusive cliques, and our disordered and selfish affections?

Baptism calls us to *die*; to submit to the waters to free us from a life of self-destruction, only to rise from the depths into a new life -- the *eternal* life of Christ, who *Himself* died so we may live. Pope Benedict wrote beautifully about the Baptism of the Lord when He said: "Jesus plunges into solidarity with sinful humanity to lift us up into new life."

Christ said: "There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished." This baptism He refers to is His death on the Cross. And His anguish is *not* over His own suffering, but *ours*: imprisoned by sin and death. Pope Benedict puts it this way: "To *accept* baptism is to go to the place of *Jesus*' baptism. We join ourselves to Him, who died so we may rise with Him."

Friends, let us *die* to sin and death; to fear and hatred; to lust or apathy. Like Christ lowering Himself into the waters of baptism, may *we* stop at nothing to love this beautiful face of God we call Jesus. And *remember*: He calls us to *find* His face in the poorest and most broken among us, loving one another selflessly, as He loves us in *our* lowest moments. **Stoop down to love, no matter what.** And prepare to be surprised! Because it's the lowly *recipients* of our kind and merciful patience, who will raise *us* up into the love of Christ Baptized, Crucified, and Risen.