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Epiphany 1C Baptism of Jesus
Peace, Seattle
January 13, 2019
Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

WINNOWED AND PRECIOUS

We began our service by giving thanks for baptism and then watched as Jesus, standing in the Jordan, was declared God's BELOVED SON.

God's saving grace embodied in the promise-laden waters of Earth is at the heart and center of worship today—and of our lives as followers of Jesus. We see this grace, we touch it, we welcome it, we remember it. And we give thanks for how it accompanies and shapes our lives all through this journey we're on.

God meets us in the water and we hear God's voice—as Jesus did—declaring: You are my beloved child; you are precious to me and I love you! Never forget that.

Yes, God meets us in the waters. But, according to Luke, there's another place, a prior place, where God in Christ also meets us; a perhaps harder place, and that's where I'd like to go with you this morning; to the threshing floor.

In the first part of our gospel, John—speaking to the crowds who've come for his baptism of repentance—says:

> "One more powerful than I is coming...he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

It's that act of winnowing I want to explore with you today. What does it mean? And how might it apply to us and to our time?

The term—and the process—of winnowing go back thousands of years to the roots of agriculture; to when our ancestors began domesticating and cultivating grains that they could use and store, instead of having to gather them while following the migrating herds.

The grain grows, is harvested, and then you need a process for separating the grain—the edible seed, the kernel—from the straw and the chaff.

Doing that requires a two-part process. The first part, threshing, separates the grain head from the husks and stocks on which the heads grow. To accomplish this, harvested stalks of grain are beat upon by brooms, or tread upon by cattle, or have a wooden sledge dragged over them.

Once the straw and grain head are separated, then you're ready for the second stage: separating the edible seed from the chaff that surrounds it. And the simplest way, the oldest way, is to throw the grain in the air—allowing the wind to blow the unwanted chaff away while the heavier kernel remains.

John the Baptist uses this image from the threshing floor to say something about what's coming; about the process by which the kernel in us, the good grain, is sifted and separated from the waste material.

And the way I understand it, he's not saying that some of us are wholesome grain while others of us are useless chaff. No, he's talking instead about the process through which the core of each of us,

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the kernel, the seed, is separated and preserved so that we can do our proper work in the world, while the dispensable material, the rough edges that no longer serve us, are gathered as fuel for the fire.

What then does it mean to be winnowed? And what is the kernel that stays?

First of all, winnowing is not something we're in charge of. That, according to John, is Jesus' job. This isn't about us making New Year's resolutions or compiling a list of old habits we want to wean ourselves from and new habits we want to embrace. Self-improvement isn't the point.

The grain doesn't tell the farmer what to do or how to do it. And in a culture that's all about individual agency and choice and self-empowerment, the fact that the Lord does not seem to want to solicit our input is itself an affront and a cause of bewilderment. WHAT DO YOU MEAN I CAN'T DICTATE THE TERMS OF MY OWN FUTURE—DETERMINE MY VALUE?!

Being winnowed by "one more powerful than I" is not an attractive scenario. And yet, isn't there some relief in that? Doesn't something deep inside you sigh when you finally understand: Hey, I don't have to engineer my own healing? When I can admit, in the spirit of the 12 steps, that my life has become unmanageable and I must depend upon a Higher Power to make my life whole?

Winnowing, then, is HIS task, and what's more, it's something we can trust him to do. Why? Because in God's eyes there is something fundamentally valuable about us! Something worth saving. As the LORD says to his exiled people through the prophet today:

> YOU ARE PRECIOUS IN MY SIGHT, AND HONORED, AND I LOVE YOU.

Jesus wants to get to heart of that, wants to find that kernel! Indeed, he invests himself in the process without reserve in order to grasp and hold and keep that which is valuable and meaningful and fruitful in us.

What, then—once the chaff is gone—what is this kernel that remains?

In his book CHRIST OF THE CELTS, John Philip Newell says the kernel that remains, the true core of our identity, is the image of God in us, that incontrovertible gift planted by God in us in the very beginning; a gift that remains no matter how sullied we human creatures may at times become; a kernel "deeper than all that is wrong."

"Everything else that is said about us in the scriptures," says Newell, "needs to be read in the light of this starting point." The image of God is not simply a characteristic it's the essence of our being.[1]

If sin is that pervasive infection that distorts us, that makes the kernel of grain appear spoiled, rotten, worthless, grace reveals the truth of what is first and deepest in us. In the words of Alexander Scott,

> "We have tended to define ourselves and one another in terms of the blight, in terms of sin or evil, in terms of failings or illnesses of our lives, instead of seeing what is deeper still, the beauty of the image of God at the core of our being."[2]

This is what remains after all the excess chaff has been winnowed away, and nothing in this world or our life experience can take that away from us.

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[1] John Philip Newell. *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation.* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008) p. 3.
[2] Quoted in *Christ of the Celts*, page 12.

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There are times in our lives when Jesus is the one guiding that winnowing process. But there are other times when the difficult and perilous circumstances and forces of life itself sift us mightily.

Last week I got a call from a woman who was looking for help so she wouldn't be evicted from her apartment. I'll call her KAREN. The more I learned of her story, the more eager I was to give her a hand.

Karen had moved across country to Seattle recently with her 1-year-old, fleeing a husband who, after three deployments in Iraq, had returned home with PTSD angry and violent.

She'd managed to find a good paying job, but was injured on the job last month in an accident that found her tumbling down three flights of stairs. Hampered by the resulting back injury that left her barely able to function, unable to care for her son, and falling behind in rent, Karen called upon her mother, who flew out from the East Coast to help her out.

The plan we discussed on the phone was that her mother would drive her to Peace the next morning so we could meet, but when morning came Karen was forced to drive here herself, because her mother was at Children's Hospital with the baby, who'd become severely ill and was hospitalized.

With all the experiences she had gone through and was going through of late, you might say life was winnowing Karen. I don't believe that Jesus was behind this winnowing, but I do believe that Jesus was accompanying her through it all. And in spite of all she was going through, a resilient and untouchable core remained. That kernel, that image of God in her, is what shone through as she hobbled through the door into Peace on Friday.

Because of your generosity, we were able, through the AGAPE FUND, to help Karen avoid eviction and she was deeply grateful. After walking her to her car and watching her struggle to get herself behind the wheel, we prayed together, seeking strength and healing; and claiming Jesus' promise that he will not leave us orphaned.

Whatever experiences may come our way, whether hastened by our own failure, the failure of others, or the luck of the draw, God's image within us cannot be eclipsed! The kernel remains.

YOU ARE PRECIOUS IN MY SIGHT, AND HONORED, AND I LOVE YOU!

It's LOVE, not judgment, that motivated God to take on human flesh in Jesus and join us on this journey. And it's LOVE, not judgement, that's at the center of Jesus' mission in the world.

From his baptism onward, Jesus shows us that his mission is about removing anything that would obscure God's sacred image in us; anything that would get in the way of us seeing ourselves, one another, and this God-infused creation as sacred, precious, beloved.

Let us pray.

Creator and Lord, on the threshing floor and at the font you call our names. Your work, your gift, is to free us from all that would stand between us and our truest, God-infused selves. In whatever circumstances we face, help us never to forget what Jesus shows us in his life, death and resurrection: that we are precious in your sight, honored, and loved. Amen.