

## **Sermon by the Rector**

*Sunday, January 11, 2009: The Feast of the Baptism of Christ*

I recently read an insightful essay by a practicing therapist. The author notes that an attitude of ambivalence characterizes human maturity. Ambivalence recognizes the ubiquity of trade-offs, the mixed nature of all our arrangements. To get something we want or need, we accept something we're not so crazy about, or give up our aspirations to something we'd like to have or believe we need.

Public life at all levels is shot through with trade-offs, of course – the "deals" good political leaders know how to cut. Part of the antipathy to President Bush comes from his perceived unwillingness to engage in the horse-trading that gets things done. We attribute this to moral rigidity, sanctimonious high-mindedness, and generally don't count it a virtue in a politician. (A little personal recollection: Jim Edgar, who served two terms as governor of Illinois, was often mocked for his aversion to deal-making. He was succeeded by George Ryan, now serving time in a federal prison, then – need I even name him? – Rod Blagojevich. Maybe we should develop more tolerance for moral rigidity).

We cut deals in the personal realm, too, though we're less willing to admit it. Trade-offs characterize even the most intimate personal relationships. When the flush of infatuation passes, we realize that if we want a serious relationship with someone, we're going to have to put up with some things we don't like or need, and forego some that we do, for the sake of the good things the relationship offers and, sometimes, just for the sake of stability.

At the center of the Christian story, there's a big trade-off, and today's account of Jesus' baptism shows it forth with great clarity. Standing on the banks of the Jordan, Jesus has options, and he must make a choice. He can maintain an arm's-length relationship with the people he's come to save: "Listen up, people. I'm here for three years. During this time, I will preach, teach, heal, and do some miracles. When my time is up I'll go back where I came from. What you do with what I've given you is up to you." He gives up nothing, trades off nothing, cuts no deals with us.

Or, he can throw in his lot with us, place his ministry and mission, and himself, at our mercy. This is what he does today. Throngs of people are going to the Jordan to be baptized by John. Some go to offer heartfelt repentance and be forgiven. Others, probably the majority, are impelled by less pure motives. People who think of themselves as leaders might well be going for show, to make a politically-expedient public display of humility. Others might think John's touch will function as a kind of talisman to ward off the consequences of evil acts and thoughts.

Jesus, without a word of explanation, identifies himself with this whole compromised multitude. He trades off his divine distance, we might say, for the sake of radical solidarity with us. With this action, he sanctifies human trade-offs, the ambivalence at the center of all human engagement and encounter, the deals we have to cut to get anywhere in this world. He is not an arm's-length savior. He knows, in his own person, what it takes to be human.

Even as we take solace in this manifestation of Jesus as our friend and brother, though, we know in our hearts that we take deal-making too far – that the mature virtue of ambivalence can cover a multitude of sins.

Public life offers lots of examples. I read recently that Christopher Hill, U.S. envoy to North Korea, consummate diplomat, recently took the North Korean "re-education" camps – "concentration camps" might be a better term – off the negotiating table. If there's to be a deal with North Korea, it will leave the camps untouched. Is this deal, even with the stability and security it might offer, worth making?

And how about some of our trade treaties. To open up commerce, we've often left the rights of workers to organized woefully underprotected. A trade-off worth making for the sake of commerce? Maybe not to workers subject to exploitation and abuse.

Our City Council is making some tradeoffs, and one in particular looks unholy to me. Reductions in city income from real estate transactions have forced the council to make cuts while protecting "core functions". "Core functions" apparently don't include full funding for the Housing First program, which gets vulnerable homeless people like Yoshio Nakada, murdered while sleeping outside on Christmas Eve, into safe and stable housing. Our representatives are trading off some things for others, and the deals they're making have some bad, even deadly, consequences.

Private life witnesses some unwarranted trade-offs, too. All of us know somebody who's given up too much – maybe identity, or integrity, or even well-being – for the sake of preserving a relationship. Maybe we've done it ourselves, or felt ourselves sliding down a slippery slope toward giving up too much.

Jesus knew himself to be on this slippery slope with us. That's why the voice of the Father speaks so that he, and those around him, can hear: "This is my beloved Son" – telling the people who Jesus is, but also reminding Jesus of who he is and where he comes from. God is reminding the Beloved, as he enters the compromised world of human trade-offs, that all deal-making occurs in the light of a world beyond this one where no deals have been cut and no trade-offs made, where the perfect is not the enemy of the good but the only reality. Under heaven, under God, in the light of the

world beyond from which we've come and to which we'll return, ambivalence is a necessary but not sufficient condition for living a human life. Some deals can be made, but others shouldn't. Where we draw the line depends on particular circumstances, and requires us to watch, listen, reflect, pray, and decide. Not an easy assignment, but one also sanctified by Jesus, who walked this path first. We are God's Beloved, like Jesus, and in the midst of life's changes and chances, deals and tradeoffs, God enjoins us to remember where we come from, and where we're going.