

Sons and Daughters of God

January 11, 1998 - Baptism of Jesus, Cycle C

Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 Acts 10:34-38 Luke 3:15-16,21-22

Today in Luke's Gospel we read of Jesus' baptism and the Holy Spirit coming upon him and the Father's words, "You are my beloved son!" This is the beginning of the spiritual life for all of us. At our baptism we enter into a relationship with God. We call him Abba, Father. That's a glorious thing. Think about that.

In my own spiritual life I entered the seminary at 17 because I was afraid to die. I thought if I became a priest on the day I died God would have to be nice to me. I went through high school and then college, and every day I spent an hour in this chapel and in that time I wanted to do a lot of good things for God. One day I made a 24-hour retreat, and as I was walking toward the retreat house, my spiritual director, Sister Joan, met me and said, "Larry, what do you need from God?" I said, "Oh, nothing, Sister, things are going very well for me." She said again, "What do you need from God?" I said, "Joan, I'm happy. Thank you very much." She didn't stop. She said for the third time, "Larry, what do you need from God?" I said, "I guess I need to be more gentle." I don't need to tell you that. As you know I was known in the seminary as the "proud, arrogant and aggressive Larry." She suggested that I spend one hour with Isaiah 43. This is where my spiritual life began.

Remember Jesus found out who he was because he was spending time in prayer. If you want to find out who you are, you must spend time in prayer. I said, "Oh, Joan, I know that passage so well. There's one line in here that says you are precious in his eyes, you are honored and he loves you and for years I would end my letters this way. You are precious in his eyes, you are honored and he loves you and I would put in parenthesis "So do I." "But," she said, "Larry, I want you to let God say that to you." So she left me and I sat down with Isaiah 43.

"Now says the Lord who created and formed you: Fear not." Remember I told you that I came to God out of pure fear, the fear of dying and he says, "Fear not! for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine." Think of the reality that God calls you by name, "You belong to me." "But Lord, I'm sinful." "You belong to me."

"When you walk through the waters, I will be with you; in the rivers you shall not drown. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned; the flames shall not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your savior, I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in return for you. Because you are precious in my eyes, you are honored and I love you." I read this once, twice, twenty times, thirty times, forty times in this hour and there I am into my prayer for fifty minutes and then I keep hearing, "You are precious in my eyes, you are honored and I love you" and I started struggling with that. I don't know if others struggle with that, but I struggled with it. I'm hearing God saying, "You are precious in my eyes, you are honored, and I love you" and I say, "God, you can't love me. I'm proud, arrogant and aggressive. I'm lust-filled. I'm like this

and I'm like that. I have to have my own way. C'mon, Lord God." I start telling God, and I could go on for at least two hours just with that. After struggling back and forth with God, in this prayer I remembered my grandmother. She was the lady of my life. She raised me. When I was in highschool ,my grandmother wanted to give me money. Grandmothers love to give their grandkids money. They love it. Even though I wanted it I said, "Oh, no, grandma, I don't want your money."

"I want you to have it."

I said, "No, I told you I don't want it."

Then my grandmother started to cry. And there is nothing worse in all the world than a grandmother's tears. "What'sa matter, Gram?" And she said, "Larry, you hurt me when you don't allow me to give you things." I said, "OK, give me the money."

Here's the image I had in my prayer as I'm struggling with God. I'm saying, "You can't love me, God, because of this, this and this and then I had this image of God crying. And I said, "God, what are you crying for?" He says, "Larry, you hurt me when you don't allow me to love you." I call this the beginning of my spiritual life. I heard as clear as I've ever heard anything in my life after many years of praying, "Larry, you...are...my...son." When I heard, "You are my son in Jesus, every dam in my life broke open. There is my grandmother crying, my God crying and there I am like a baby on the floor with my Bible weeping with the reality that in Jesus Christ, I, too, am a son of the Father. It so transformed me, it was such a power in my life that that night I said, "God, even speak to me tonight in my dreams" and don't you ever say that unless you mean it because that night I had a dream. I was home in Pittsburgh, not ordained yet, I was just a kid and everybody was possessed. I start performing exorcisms. I go up to the person and say, "In Jesus name, leave that person." And what do you think the devil did? He laughed at me. I hate to be laughed at. I said, "Excuse me, I don't think you understood. "In the name of Jesus Christ leave that person." The devil kept laughing. I'll never forget this, I get goose bumps every time I tell this story. The devil was inside of me. I can still feel him. My hands were flailing. My knees were going up to my chest, and I started levitating on the ceiling. I start screaming, "You can't do this to me! In Jesus name I command you to leave me." The more I did this, the more he laughed at me. All of a sudden I heard in my dream the same thing I heard in my prayer, "Larry, he can't do this to you. In Jesus you...are...my...son." As soon as I heard, "You are my son," and I said yes to that the devil screamed and left me. And I went to all my friends and relatives and I touched them and I said, "You are God's son, you are God's daughter and the devil screamed and left them, and I woke up. I was soaking wet. That dream was so real it changed my life.

The next morning my spiritual director asked me if God told me anything. And I told her my experience. She said, "The whole point of your ministry is to tell people they are sons and daughters of the Father." So every time I give a retreat and every time we come to this feastday, this is what the feast day is about. Jesus Christ heard and his ministry began when he entered into relationship with his Father God and he heard, "You are my son." And we are baptized into Christ Jesus, and if we are baptized in Christ Jesus then we too must hear, "You are my daughter, you are my son." When we enter into that intimate relationship with our God then we have the power to live the life of a son or daughter of God. We enter into that power of who we are, who we are baptized to be. We aren't

victims anymore. Sometimes we walk around like victims. I don't know. What can I do? I'm just weak. I am powerless. You are strong. You are the son or daughter of the Father in Christ Jesus. We must begin acting that way, knowing more than anything else that we are loved by God.

Today Jesus comes to tell you who you are, to remind you of who you are and call you to live that way. What do you have to worry about? You are a prince or a princess of the Father God who loves you and will never let you go.