

WEEKLY REFLECTION
Epiphany 1C, 2022
Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Vladimir Korotkov

Our Baptism:
Loved and Valued to be Free!

1. Identification and parent-child dynamics: You are my beloved if you are me

In her book *Risking Difference: Identification, Race and Community*, Jean Wyatt explores family dynamics and primary identifications between parent and child.

Informed by psychoanalysis, she suggests that parent-child relationships are shaped by the desire, demand and language of the parent. For her, parental desire functions *properly* when the child is offered affirming language and practice, enabling the child to eventually become a separate subject, and in time to negotiate life creatively and confidently. A healthy, separate identity is encouraged.

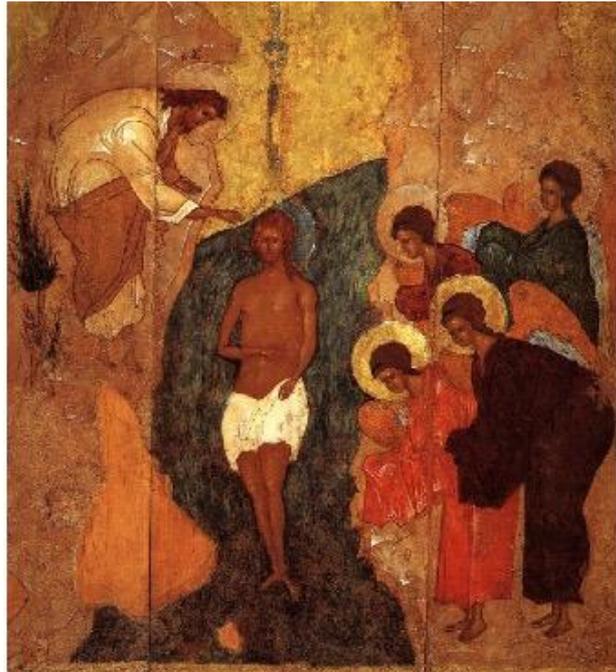
And parenting does *not function properly*, she continues, when it shifts into demand. She notes that when demand is the dominant mode of relationship the underlying message to the child becomes “I want you to be me”. The result is a fusion of the self (child) and the other (parent).

Wyatt shares an example of this fusion from D. H. Lawrence’s book, *The Rainbow*. In this story she finds “the classic description of an overbearing parent and an accommodating daughter” (46). In Lawrence’s story, Will, the father, is dissatisfied with his relationship with his wife, which makes him feel incomplete. Lawrence writes, “so Ursula became the child of his father’s heart”. “As Ursula grows her heart followed him as if he had some tie with her” (47) ... feel my feelings, want what I want, be me, complete me... (48).”

As Ursula becomes an adult, Wyatt suggests she remains fixed in a defensive autonomy, and relationships are a power struggle, to which she either submits or obliterates the other. (49)

In a second example, taken from an autobiography by Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape*

for a Good Woman, Wyatt discusses the intersection between demanding parental figures and “the social world outside the front door”, which, through identification, of the parental class and language, creates “class contempt” and inferiority in the child. Steedman narrates a memory when a social worker, visiting to enquire about the health of her newly born sister, insults her mother by commenting, “This house isn’t fit for a baby!” (51) It is evident, Wyatt writes, that Steedman writes as if she was the one being insulted. Excessive over-identification! Wyatt points out that the mother-daughter dynamic excluded emotional and healthy psychological engagement. She writes that the mother regarded the child as a receptacle for her own feelings about her economic



deprivations, has projected her desires into her child; consequently, the child grows up assuming “that they are her own desires and not her mother’s.” (53) She has introjected, taken into her unconscious, her psychological-and-social mother, which then unknowingly shapes her values, feelings, thoughts, behaviour and relationships with others and the world.

2. You are my beloved Child!

In our story in Luke 3, after he concludes his baptism, Jesus experiences God’s voice as parent which is full of contrasts to the parent-child identifications shared by Jean Wyatt.

Let us look at our text.

Jesus simply appears, “as one of the anonymous crowd” (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 128) and is baptised. We already know he comes from the obscure village of Nazareth, in the notorious area of Galilee, “regarded with contempt and suspicion by most southern Jews” (Ched, 128). “Yet it is precisely upon this figure, of ... doubtful social origins, in this remote region [of Galilee] that the divine favour falls” (Ched, 128).

Yet, in his baptism, Jesus is more than just an outsider and unremarkable! Jesus is seen and named as the beloved child of God. In this powerful experience, Jesus mysteriously encounters the loving, affirming and empowering presence of the transcendent God, a caring, compassionate, generative parent God.

Luke, borrowing Mark’s interpretation of this event, adds strong themes from Israel’s history to develop the depth of meaning in this event of God’s relationship with Jesus.

Jesus’ seeing the Spirit descending suggests a visual recognition of his being seen and thus valued and loved by God as he is, now, in his being and becoming. It reminds us of Genesis 1:2 and the hovering of the Creative Spirit over chaos and unformed world, forming a new creation. This time it is a reshaping of Jesus’ identity, who will live generatively to work with God and humanity to reshape society!

Then there is the voice of God. It is interesting to note that Freud interpreted the parental voice of the Jewish God as one of authority and demand. However, the literary critic Harold Bloom argued that Freud’s conception was more Roman than Jewish. Bloom writes:

Yahweh is not an authority, which after all is a Roman conception and not a Jewish one. An authority founds and augments ... but Yahweh is a creator, a revealer, and a redeemer, whose attributes yield us the blessings of more life, rather than those that ensue from the foundation and augmentation of institutions. (Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 26)

This is how God sees Jesus in this story. This seeing and naming not only anoints and empowers Jesus as God’s agent to carry out God’s love for the world, the desire to bring freedom and hope to the world. This naming and calling begins with God as Parent seeing, valuing and affirming, about taking delight in this child of God in the child’s separateness. That is why this “blessing of more life”, to use Bloom’s words, is not about parental demand, a fusion, pressure to over-identify. This is about working together, sharing divergent power; each participating and contributing what the other/Other can not. Again, a healthy, separate identity is encouraged.

God is the beyond and mysteriously in our midst; Jesus is in our midst from the beyond, as fully human, as challenged by human existence as are each of us. God is without need to demand and control; it is the character of God to allow freedom its existence, given to the universe, life, humanity; God desires shared love, which means

living with division, separateness, even powerlessness, permitting humanity to variously express its freedoms.

This voice celebrates who Jesus is as a human being. Jesus is seen, loved, affirmed, named, and invited to receive a new self, “brought into a new existence” by God’s seeing, naming and calling.

The language and images are vital for Jesus’ inner life, which affirm and value him, as vital for all human beings. While others in Luke will question Jesus socio-economic status, he carries no envy or defence.

3. In Jesus’ baptism, we too are seen, valued and loved

In our baptism, we too are seen by God, receive a new self. We are named, loved, affirmed and invited into the intimacy of communion of truth, honesty, grace and love. We have been offered intimacy, companionship and identity like no other has or can offer us. And the love of God is given to us, even before we know it or do anything. Grace!

As Dorothy McRae McMahon has written:

Jesus, in his baptism was recognized and announced to the people as the beloved child of God. In the Isaiah passage, we listen to a God who says “I have called you by name, you are mine”. As people of faith, we believe that we are personally known and loved by God. Humanity is not some anonymous mass of people in the eyes of God, but each one is valued and known. Each journey does matter, each moment of pain and joy is shared by God in ways which are deep and authentic. Each struggle is honoured by God, accompanied as though it is unique and guided by the Holy Spirit. We are never lost in the infinity of universal life.

Conclusion

We need to add to Dorothy’s words, “Each journey does matter, each moment of pain and joy is shared by God in ways which are deep and authentic”, that our baptism invites us into the journey of discernment and ongoing freedom. That is, as Jean Wyatt has suggested in her book, to undertake a journey to discover what kind of family dynamics and primary identifications we have experienced and have shaped us, and then to address those aspects which contradict our baptism, and growing into our new identity.

Julia Kristeva, psychoanalyst and writer, suggests that addressing our challenging parent-child identifications that we have experienced is a process of revolt. She writes that revolt is “a protest against already established norms, values, and powers”, which are disempowering, and the way they are taken into our inner being, into our inner psychic life. (*Intimate Revolt*, 3) Such a revolt, she maintains, is explicit in Christian theology, notably in Saint Augustine. He encouraged “the possibility of questioning one’s own being, searching for oneself” ... “the work of revolt ... opens psychical life to infinite re-creation... (5f)

The meaning, weight and lightness of our lives, and thus the degrees of freedom are shaped by our socio-symbolic life-worlds: our family systems, religious community, our institutions, culture, society, nation and globalised world. Julia Kristeva writes that Freud observed in his book, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, that human freedom is shackled by the human need to live in community.

We are invited, as Julia Kristeva continues, to break the shackles by living in a perpetual state of rebirth. This art of living requires recognition of what Winnicott terms, “false selves” constructed to defend ourselves against the external world, and to work for the release of our interior life in its freedom. “To restart our inner psychological life with our own genuine desires, vision and values, opening up choices that guarantee the plurality of an individual’s capacity for connection.” (Kristeva, 234) This is our baptismal rite/right!