

Saint Patrick was once baptizing new converts in a river. He would wade out waist-deep into the water and call out for new Christians to come to him, one by one, to receive the sacrament. One day he baptized a mountain chieftain. Saint Patrick was holding a staff in his hands as the new converts made their way into the water. Unfortunately, as he was lowering the chief down under the water three times, he also pressed his staff down into the river bottom.

Afterwards the people on the riverbank noticed their chief limp back to shore. Someone explained to Patrick that, as he pressed the wooden staff into the riverbed, he must have also bruised the foot of the chief. Patrick went to the chief at once and asked, "Why did you not cry out when I stuck you in the foot?"

Surprised the chief answered, "I remembered you telling us about the nails in the cross, and I thought my pain was part of my baptism."

Most of us were baptized as children but I wonder how many how many of us would have been baptized if we knew pain was a part of the process. Not physical pain normally but the painful process of looking at the lives we lead in the light of the lives the lord called us to lead.

I think what was both fascinating and frightening about the preaching of John the Baptist was that he put people into the presence of God. Now that's what everybody wants, **and** that's what everybody doesn't want. In the presence of God everything looks different. On an average day we can compare ourselves with each other, and all of us can come off looking good.

We convince ourselves that God grades on the curve, and what's the difference if I'm not that faithful? We're all okay. And then you come into the presence of God, you hear his call and it's all different. The explaining is over. The excusing is over. It's the school, it's the church, it's the job, it's the government, it's those other folk. But it isn't! All that's over. It just stops. In my mind, I serve God. But there's another force in my life, and I say, 'I'm going to do that.' I don't do it. I say, 'I'll never do that.' I do it. We see ourselves as we really are – somewhere between the sky of what I intend and the earth of what I perform. "

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian, makes the distinction between "cheap grace" and "costly grace." Cheap grace is going to church to hear the comfortable words, the good news about God's unconditional love. Then snuggling in it, as if it were a down comforter, leaving church with a warm, peaceful feeling, but not letting the one who brought that love into the world, who died for you because of that love, challenge the way you are now living. Our baptism opened up new possibilities to us but have we decided that living as Christian will cost too much?

Back when the telegraph was the fastest means of long-distance communication, there was a story about a young man who applied for a job as a Morse code operator. Answering an ad in the newspaper, he went to the address that was listed. When he arrived, he entered a large, noisy office. In the background a telegraph clacked away. A sign on the receptionist's counter instructed job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned to enter the inner office.

The young man completed his form and sat down with seven other waiting applicants. After a few minutes, the young man stood up, crossed the room to the door of the inner office, and walked right in. Naturally the other applicants perked up, wondering what was going on. Why had this man been so bold? They muttered among themselves that they hadn't heard any summons yet. They took more than a little satisfaction in assuming the young man who went into the office would be reprimanded for his presumption and summarily disqualified for the job.

Within a few minutes the young man emerged from the inner office escorted by the interviewer, who announced to the other applicants, "Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming, but the job has been filled by this young man."

The other applicants began grumbling to each other, and then one spoke up, "Wait a minute -- I don't understand. He was the last one to come in, and we never even got a chance to be interviewed. Yet he got the job. That's not fair."

The employer responded, "All the time you've been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message in Morse code: 'If you understand this message, then come right in. The job is yours.' None of you heard it or understood it. This young man did. So the job is his."

Our livelihood, or more precisely our life, depends upon our ability to discern the meaning of these words: "You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Let us pretend that you are part of the military, part of a presidential honor guard. Every day the President walks into his office, and you snap to attention, click your heels and salute the President. The President nods. Every day, this same procedure occurs. The President walks in; you snap to attention, click your heels and salute. The relationship is stiff, formal, technical, with eyes never looking the President in the eye but eyes always straight ahead, frozen like a stiff wooden soldier. But...in this story...one day, the President stops in front of you, the young soldier, and says to you. "Please follow me into my office." You do so and the door is closed. The President orders you to be seated and then looks you in the eye and says, "I want you to become one of my children. I want you to become part of our family. I want you to come to our family outings, our family picnics, the family birthday parties, the family Christmases. I want you to become part of our family." What a moment. What a miracle. And in that moment, the relationship between the President and the young soldier is totally transformed.

That is precisely what happens to us in our baptism. It is God who takes the initiative. The relationship is totally transformed. Baptism is the fantastic invitation from God to know us intimately and closely, so closely that we are called son or daughter, that we become family.

The rite of Baptism can sometimes seem too focused on washing away sin and we miss whole point of a bath, which is a preparation. We bathe because of what we've got planned for after the bath--we're going to put on clean clothes and go to a party or to work or even to bed to make love or go to sleep.

I hope you got wet at the beginning of mass. It is the best way I know to remember the baptism that made us a family, made us a part of God's family. But like any bath it was mainly a preparation for what comes next. It might be painful, it might be costly, it might be fulfilling and rewarding and comforting. If you got wet, it will dry. We have all been washed in the waters of baptism and that has changed us forever. God wants to come close, will we let him make us part of his family?