

Pentecost 2014

The caravan rolled slowly down Mound Avenue past where the pavement ended, all the way to the water of the bay. Mound Avenue was the street that ran just by the side of our family beach house... one of those streets in Panama City, like other coastal cities, that ran straight into the bay so as to give the public access to the water... Back in the day when there used to be a bar up on the corner of Mound Ave. and Hwy. 98... named the "Chat and Chew," all manner of folk would make their way down to the bay... Drunken brawls, lovers' quarrels... sometimes a solitary soul brought by the river of humanity to stand and study the genius of the trembling waters... Our great mother.

The caravan was about a dozen or so cars... several pickup trucks full of passengers in the beds who jostled like marionettes as they made their way over the ruts of the dirt road that led to the waters edge; the engines laboring against the sweltering sand... about seventy souls perhaps. The first person to get out of the lead truck was a short, plump man in overalls who carried a guitar.... He motioned to the company to disembark.... One by one and then two by two they entered the water... men in overalls and work-shirts; women in thin cotton print dresses; children holding the hands of their parents or siblings as the whole company waded out into the water... waist high for some... chest high for some of the children... My brothers and I and a friend from next door were already in the water on that hot summer afternoon... We were having a swim to get out of the heat... It was afternoon and the wind had picked up... There were whitecaps on the water... We stood, wide-eyed, just outside of the circle they had formed... The man with the guitar began playing and sang in a nasal voice, something about water and the blood of the lamb and Jesus, and God's deeds of power, and death and life... His companions joined in with their hands raised in solemn praise... these were good country people, holy rollers, my mother would later say.

One woman stepped forward, and the short plump man handed his guitar to an attendant and placed one hand behind the woman's head and the other over her face and he submerged her supine down into the water, her thin dress disembodied among the waves, and shouted... I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.... He raised the woman up out of the water... She was crying... and all shouted amen... our eyes met those of the other children... eyes from another world they seemed... a seagull wheeled and cawed... They prayed, they sang, hands uplifted in gratitude, as if praising the very elements themselves, sand, sky,

water... salt, light... and then they waded back to shore and one by one the caravan left as they had come... all was the same.... Sand, sky, water, salt light.

This is a true story by the way... The next morning early at high tide... (we could tell it was high tide because the air on the porch was cool... cooled by the gulf water pulled in by the waxing moon...) That next morning we heard something like wind, but it was not wind... We looked to the water and between our dock and the neighbor's dock the water was boiling... We ran down to the beach and just under the surface of the water were hundreds and hundreds of fish.. Spanish Mackerel, bluefish , Jacks... like silver, like lightning as they turned and flashed in improbable unison... They stayed and persisted making circles with joyful abandon... circles prescribed by some ancient genius, frenzied, ecstatic... We got fishing gear, but we caught none... and as soon as they had arrived they left, back into the deep... our hearts roiled by such extroverted life.

I remember this from my childhood as if it were yesterday... and the more I remember it the less I think these two stories are unrelated... certainly in my imagination they are the same story.

In our Gospel reading today, the scribes of the community of John are instructing us that not apart from the heart of Jesus... from the heart of the believer flows rivers of living water... That it is from the heart of the believer that salvation comes to the world... that it is the vocation of the church, the believers, to bring living water to our world.... So, that begs the question:... What does it mean to believe? I don't think it means to assent to dogma or creed or theological system... that would be too easy... that would be selling the spiritual quest far too short... the word for belief in the Koine Greek is perhaps better translated trust....trust... acting as if....Trusting being led into water... water the most ancient force of all nature... water that is deadly, and water that is life giving. There is but one truth dear people of God that pervades Holy Scripture, if one wished to distill the truth of the matter... a truth extant before time itself... and that is that in order to live... we first must die... We must with all courage go down to the water and drown... we must go down into the water and leave there our illusions, our shame, our fear, our self importance... We must leave there our false selves... and we must find there our life, life that flashes like lightning, like silver fire, frenzied, ecstatic... true.

This is not something for the life hereafter... This is a reality of which the ancient scribes speak... a reality that speaks of the life we are meant to live now, right now... a life without fear and shame, a life empowered to love as God loves... no less... no less.... But first, we must go down... go

down into the dark and roiled waters of our false selves, the dark water of our despair and fear... and die... and decompose and be reborn... "Those are pearls that were our eyes."

This is what baptism is all about, dying to falsehood and rising to our true selves... and not *for* ourselves, but for our world... Baptism is not self-help therapy. It is about empowerment... so that we become useful for God... living water, the metaphor, a force of nature... In this process of death by water we become living water for our world. We enter the shameful and unjust and deathly waters of our world as life giving water... Baptism is not a sentimental, private sepia photo opportunity... It is a public witness to and celebration of the profound reality that it is in dying to all that is false... dying to our illusions that keep us captive... and living into our true selves which is a life of freedom and joy and saving agency... a life of purpose, a life of creative self giving... this is the life for which we are made... it is our genius, and we dare not shrink from it...

Oh brothers and sisters lets go down... let's go down... Take hold of the hand of your parents, take hold of the hands of your siblings in the faith... Trust your friends... We never go down alone... Oh sisters, oh brothers let's go down... let's go down and find life, let's go down and find the water that is alive and living, like silver, like lightning... and become living water, a river of life... holy... rolling... from which all may drink... so that all may live.... Oh people let's go down, and with hearts brimming with gratitude, let us live.