

Don't Touch the Water

The Baptism of the Lord

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If you ever read the book *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson, or seen the movie based on the same book named *Origin*, there is one scene that may have stood out to you above all the rest. If you are like me, it probably made you feel sad, guilty, angry, and uncertain. The scene I am referring to is the story of a boy named Al Bright that took place in Youngstown, OH in 1951.

Al played on a little league baseball team. After winning the championship, the entire team went to a municipal swimming pool for a picnic and celebration. There was one problem. Al was an African American, the only one on the team. At the pool, everyone was allowed in except Al. He had to watch the pool party from outside the fence. His friends really wanted to include him, so they passed him food through the fence and talked to him in between their jumps into the water. After about an hour of negotiating with the park ranger, Al's friends finally found a way to get him into the pool on that hot Summer day that didn't break any of the city's policies. First, everybody had to get out of the pool. Second, Al would be placed on a raft and propelled around the pool by the lifeguard on the condition that he would never actually touch the water. As the scene took place, the lifeguard kept saying

to Al over and over again, 'don't touch the water,' 'don't touch the water.' Al rigidly laid on the raft, careful not to move, as he was paraded around the pool with everyone watching.

This weekend, we are celebrating the feast of the baptism of the Lord. After being immersed in the water by John the Baptist, we are told in the Gospel of Matthew that when Jesus came up from the water, the heavens opened and a voice said, 'this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.'

The symbolism of touching the water on today's feast is so powerful. On the one hand, water is so readily available. Like grace, it is everywhere and everyone needs it for survival. On the other, water is not readily accessible to everyone. On a physical level, we know cities without clean drinking water and plenty of places around the globe without access to running water. On a spiritual level, we also know that humans like to channel the waters of grace and even baptism itself away from certain people that we consider unworthy. Like the park ranger and lifeguards did for Al, we may pretend we are making helpful accommodations, but unless we let others touch the waters directly for themselves, our accommodations are really veiled insults and discriminatory.

The waters of baptism remind us that grace is to be touched by all.

From whom do I withhold the waters of life, even if secretly?
How do I respond when I see others withhold the waters of life from other people?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray that we may have the mind of God, who, in the Second Reading from the Acts of the Apostles, shows 'no partiality.' When it comes to grace, we are all beloved daughters and sons of God. There is no caste system. No one is excluded from the pool. All of us can touch the water.