

Rheta Grimsley Johnson is a reporter, columnist, and author whose writings I first encountered while living in Tupelo, Mississippi. I always looked forward to reading her column in the local newspaper. So when I spied a book by Johnson at my mother-in-law's home after Christmas, I immediately pulled it off the shelf to look at it. The title itself was intriguing: *Poor Man's Provence: Finding Myself in Cajun Louisiana*. Having once heard Johnson speak in person about her travels in France, I already knew that she was enamored with French culture. So I wasn't surprised to learn that she and her husband had fallen in love with Cajun country and had purchased a second home in Henderson, Louisiana. Their primary residence is in Iuka, Mississippi, a town in the northeastern-most county of the state about two and a half hours southwest of here.

In one of the chapters in *Poor Man's Provence*, Johnson discusses two times in her travels when she encountered large gatherings of Harley-Davidson motorcycle riders. The largest was when she happened upon the annual rally for Harley enthusiasts in Sturgis, South Dakota. Some members of our St. Andrew community have been to that event. The other venue, surprisingly, was at the annual Mardi Gras run in a small town in the middle of Cajun country, Mamou, Louisiana. Reflecting on that experience, Johnson writes:

“It is perhaps the saddest moment of youth, the day you realize you are many things, but mostly you are ordinary. More or less the same as everyone else. I think fighting that reality, the common curse of being ordinary, is why people buy Harleys, or join Mardi Gras krewes. It is why we all enjoy frivolous festivals and extravaganzas and wearing exotic masks, whatever the excuse. It is why some dye their hair blond, or purple, or run marathons, or go back to school after mid-life. We are saying to ourselves and to anyone else who bothers to notice, 'I'm different, not ordinary at all. I'm a wolf in sheep's clothing, don't cross me. I'm wild, untamed, apart from the pack.’” And then Johnson the author confesses she knows very well that's why people write books, too.¹

You may not agree with Johnson's conclusion about why people do any of those things. We probably do them for a variety of reasons, including having fun. But speaking generally, I wonder if Johnson isn't onto something about people

1 Rheta Grimsley Johnson, *Poor Man's Provence: Finding Myself in Cajun Louisiana* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouthBooks, 2008), p. 155.

battling against the threat of seeming ordinary.

That is a good place to start as we reflect on the baptism of Jesus. It also is a good place to start when we reflect on the meaning of his baptism and our own, and the differences between the two. Let's begin by considering the differences.

First of all, as people came to John the Baptist to be baptized, they came confessing their sins. As the sinless Son of God, Jesus had no sins to confess, so why would he choose to take part in John's baptism? This was baffling to John - maybe it is to us as well. Jesus replied: "it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus' baptism was about his committing himself to God's will and consenting to the intentions God had for his unique and extraordinary life.

After his baptism, Jesus received divine confirmation that he was on the right track: he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and landing on him. Then a voice from heaven provided a public affirmation of Jesus' unique identity: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Another aspect of this public affirmation of Jesus' unique identity is that it connects to the 2nd Psalm, which speaks of the inauguration of a new king: "You are my son; today I have begotten you." (Ps 2:7b) The language is so similar that it is obvious that Matthew, Mark, and Luke have applied the text of the psalm to describe the baptism of Jesus. The words from heaven confirm that Jesus fulfills the role of the anointed king or messiah. Another powerful theme in the story is that God comes to us, as God came to John the Baptist, in ways that defy our expectations and surprise us.

The baptism of Jesus is unique because of the nature of the baptism that John provided and because of who Jesus happens to be - the Christ, the Messiah. As the sinless Son of God, Jesus is different from all the other people who came to be baptized by John and he is different from us.

Our baptism is not distinguished by our uniqueness, but by our common humanity. Our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection is a sacrament, but it also is an ordinary rite of passage that makes us members of God's family in Christ. As such, in baptism, we are reminded not of our uniqueness but of our belongingness, of whose we are, to whom we belong. As we say to newly baptized persons at the close of the baptismal liturgy, "You belong to Christ, in whom you have been baptized."

After Jesus was baptized, do you remember what happened next? He was led or driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. We'll hear more about that in a couple of months on the First Sunday in Lent, so I won't go into much detail about it now. But today, it is noteworthy that there is a strong connection between the words from heaven at Jesus' baptism and the words from the devil in the first two temptations. The first two temptations begin with the words, "If you are the Son of God." In other words, the devil begins his temptations by questioning Jesus' identity. This is an effort to get Jesus to view his identity as one of privilege instead of service, tempting Jesus to step off the path of consent to the intentions God has for his life.

Something like that is always a danger for us too. We live in a world that tempts us with all manner of things to insulate us from our fears of being ordinary. Trying to feel good enough about who we are can be a never-ending battle through life. So we strive to make something of ourselves, to prove our worth and uniqueness through the things we accomplish and the honors and goods we acquire - versus accepting our worth as an unconditional given, a gift of God through the grace of Christ. We know we need to challenge ourselves to become the best version of our selves we can be. But hopefully, we also realize that no amount of striving to prove that we are not ordinary will ever give us the fulfillment we crave. Can we accept ourselves as having sufficient identity through belonging to Christ in baptism?

As followers of Jesus, we return again and again to this truth that shapes us: we belong to Christ, in whom we have been baptized. That truth has the power to carry us through each day of our lives. In the midst of our joys and sorrows, our victories and defeats and all that the years may bring, God's love for us is an unconditional given in Christ. It is never up to us to earn it, deserve it, or prove ourselves worthy of it.

The German artist, Matthias Grünewald, created a powerful artistic depiction of the crucifixion five hundred years ago. The painting shows Jesus' mother, Mary, and the beloved disciple, John, comforting each other on one side of the cross. On the other side is John the Baptist. Since John the Baptist was executed before Jesus, this is not a scene that actually occurred at the cross. But the portrayal is true to the spirit and witness of John the Baptist, especially from the standpoint of the Gospel of John.

In Grünewald's painting, John the Baptist holds a book, presumably the Bible, in his left hand and points with the index finger of his right hand toward Jesus.

Below John stands a lamb. These components of the painting remind viewers how John pointed out Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29b) Behind John appear words in Latin. Translated into English they say, “He must increase, but I must decrease,” another statement John the Baptist makes in John’s Gospel. (John 3:30)

As we reflect on the significance of the baptism of Jesus and our own baptism on the eighth day of 2017, those are good words to ponder. What might happen in our lives, in our St. Andrew community, and in our world this year if we resolved to hold the same intention, “Christ must increase, but I must decrease?” How’s that for a New Year’s resolution?

As our focus on Christ and on the gifts God gives us through baptism increases, our self-striving can become less driven, less obsessive-compulsive. We do not need to defend ourselves against the threat of being ordinary. By means of our baptism, God gives us everything we need to accept ourselves as we are.

In the baptism of Jesus, Matthew assures us that we can count on Jesus to show us who God is and what God is like. We need to hear about that again and again. As we listen to the gospel through each year, we continue learning from Jesus about who God is and who we are as well. Through God’s grace, we grow clearer in our discernment of how God is calling us to serve as individuals and as a community together at St. Andrew in this new year of our Lord, 2017.