

### ***Buddy System***

John 20:19-31; Acts 8:26-40

Seth E. Weeldreyer

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Baptism of Owen Robert Lee

I *wanted* to glide through the water – to dive like a dolphin plunging to the depths, or nearly still just rippling the surface as if held up like a leaf by some divine breeze. I felt fascinated and afraid. Other kids had pools. They seemed like some exotic fantasy land to a boy who grew up rambling through a forest. My family’s idea of swimming was frolicking in pools on vacation. My mother dressed us all in matching homemade bathing suits. And she even wore hers – for the style and symbolic connection. While my father would stand in the pool to catch us jumping off the side fully protected – arms in puffies and innertubes around the waist, face cocked up and scrunched with anticipation. The same swimming armor that kept us from getting our hair too wet, splashed huge waves on my father’s chilled chest and face. What sacrificial love! How do I know? Because there I was years later enduring the torture, (ahem) enjoying the delight with my kids.

The epitome of swimming stress and embarrassment came in my college Health Dynamics course when I discovered muscles I never knew I had ... and actually swam one length of the Olympic size pool, holding the edge, heaving for air by the end. Perhaps my highest anxiety began years earlier at Boy Scout summer camp. My first year, insecure with all these other kids I barely knew and intimidated by my inferiority, I didn’t do the swim test because I actually wanted to swim. I really wanted canoeing merit badge, which was impossible if you didn’t make “swimmer.” But I was terrified to be in over my head very long. The way I remember my heart tense and limbs basically locked up it must have only been the grace of some divine Poseidon-like hand keeping me afloat for the required 60 seconds. My older brother and parents were stunned when I told them I passed! Especially when that same year an older scout high school state swimming champion who could swim across the lake and back was ruled a beginner! That’s where I learned: it didn’t matter if we were a beginner or swimmer. We all needed the buddy system – no entering the water without someone else to put their tag on the board next to yours. And every time the whistle blew, you had to find that friend and clasp hands high in the air.

The way Luke tells the story the Ethiopian eunuch was a “beginner” who needed a buddy to help him make “swimmer” in a life of faith. He had the basic idea ... at least as much as anyone can know about doing the breaststroke from a how-to video, and wading up to your knees. Unlike my youth he was eager to get in the water and give it try, diving deep into scripture. Isn’t that what faithfulness is often all about? Getting in, frolicking with a bit of fun, plunging to the depths when life can seem over our head, trusting that God will keep us afloat and give us the strength to keep on stroking. Who is this passage talking about, the Ethiopian wanted to know?

Now you know, the power of God’s grace in this story isn’t just about how the Ethiopian came to know Christ. It’s about Phillip ... and how God’s Spirit brings them together in Christ. There here is, the Ethiopian, so obviously a foreigner and according to religious rules

likely someone unfit to be in God's presence at the temple. In short, he's another in along line of outcasts. There he is, in his Cadillac Escalade of the day, with gleaming rims and dark tinted windows. But if you peer through the surface façade to the person inside, you find someone just longing to know God, to live with goodness, to learn with a friend who will take the initiative to get to know him at least a little and to love him. And just maybe, in our midst, we see the hands, the face, the love of our Lord.

It's not unlike the disciples themselves, locked up in that room together even after Jesus had been raised from the dead – fascinated with reports they heard, yet deeply afraid. Both stories from the Bible today tell us about God's power in the risen Christ to transform lives. To pass through whatever barriers / locked doors / barricaded hearts and minds. To share wounds and respond to doubts. To spread forgiveness and the fullness of God's peace. The key question John asks that has echoed through the centuries is: what about those of us who have not and cannot touch and see Jesus? How is it possible for us and so many others like Thomas who simply weren't present in that day?

You know the great test of swimming I still have never gotten over completely is what it all feels like and what I've learned to fear. We're trained in life to trust by sight and touch – to have empirical verification, solid evidence guide what we do. And actually, Jesus invites it in this text. I always feel like I want to defend Thomas. You know, he's the one in the end who gives the greatest affirmation about Jesus of anyone in John's gospel – my Lord and my God! Maybe the trouble with Thomas isn't his relationship with Jesus, rather his relationship with others. You see, in rejecting word that Jesus came earlier, Thomas is rejecting the others, his relationship with them in some small way, but symbolically as well. These are the ones with whom he has shared life. For John and the community of people with whom he lived, this relationship, this shared life, love, trust, support we share is the greatest expression of Jesus' presence and work in the world ... especially as that Spirit gets extended to others. Thomas's so called "doubt" is not so much unacceptable skepticism as it is a rejection of the others with whom he lives in community – their eyes, their fingers, their words and experience.

Truth is: that's what makes the difference in our life and faith, particularly in our relationships with other faithful people. How do people trust what they hear? (based on Martin Marty, *Feasting on the Word*, year C vol. 2. 400)

- 1) know and trust the person / character speaking;
- 2) share some sympathy / empathy – similar experiences and emotions especially in suffering
- 3) truth spoken helps make sense of life / bring order.

What do we see and hear and touch in others? When they're locked up in fear however real or not. When they're confined by the persecution of some illness or institution of society. When they feel the deep wounds to their hope, courage, strength for life. How is Christ made known through it all?

How does God call us like the earliest apostles to go to others like Samaritans and Ethiopian eunuchs and to the ends of the earth in our day? You see, friends, when I read these Bible texts today two things become clear to me about the good news: God's grace releases us from our fears and locked up confinements of body, mind or spirit to new abundant life. And with

that abundant life God sends us in grace to share it with others, even those beyond our comfort zone. Maybe something like the breaststroke – from our heart reaching out to others. Something like the way Phillip was the Ethiopian eunuch's buddy when they went into the water of baptism.

You know I'm still not a great swimmer. After getting canoeing merit badge that first year, I never even tried the test again. Now my attempts to dive often leave my chest red, and the pool with a few gallons less water. I don't open my eyes underwater. But with what I can do I've enjoyed cradling or carrying each one of my children for their first laps around the edge. And I take great vicarious pleasure in seeing them swim in Grammie and Grampie's pool far more accomplished at diving down for toys at the bottom than I'll ever be!

Friends, there are so many ways and places we can swim in this world. And the greatest my comfort is that wherever I go I know from sea to shining sea and whatever pools I pass along the way, I have buddies in Christ. And he'll be there with us. There are so many different churches, different ways to baptize. Today my sister-in-law and her husband have my baby niece baptized in a northern Jersey Roman Catholic church.

We baptize Owen Robert Lee. As I cradle him God claims him and promises to love him; to keep him afloat in whatever the water, however far it may be over our head. God calls him to learn to swim with Christ; and to commit to teaching others, to take them for a lap around the pool one day, as well. As we celebrate this sacrament we remember God's claim and call to all of us, whether we were baptized as an infant or an adult.

The true beauty and goodness of this time we will share is in how Owen has already come to know his extended family in God's grace – all of us who are Owen's buddies in Christ, to keep him afloat. The beauty we've seen at church events like Lenten Suppers, hardly a moment sitting in his stroller ... passed around in everyone's loving embrace!

Like Owen's cries this morning, we will all have times in life when we feel something is not right, maybe when we feel outcast. When it seems the puffies and innertubes of life are far behind us and we're terrified of the water that's far over our head. All of us may feel as though we need someone to lead us back to the pool of baptism. So may the Spirit lead us in whatever our need today! So may we see it and share it everyday ... in all the ways we put our nametags on the board of life experience and get ready to raise our hands together – caring for Owen and for one another – God's buddy system!

Thanks be to God. Amen.