

Tenth Weekend After Pentecost (B/RCL): "Leading Ducklings & Letting Ourselves Be Led"
Ephesians 3:14-21
July 28-29, 2018

The possible winner of the 2018 "Mother of the Year" award may be a resident of Minnesota: Lake Bemidji, to be precise. The mother in question is a duck, a common merganser, suited to freshwater lakes. This Supermama has been photographed with a trail of 76 ducklings obediently swimming behind her in a near perfect line. Clearly she's not big enough to have sat on a ginormous nest holding 76 eggs. So how did this happen??

Apparently it's not unusual for a mother duck (who might lay up to a dozen eggs) to "dump" some of them in other ducks' nests. It's a survival move, increasing the chances that some of her ducklings will hatch even if predators raid a nest or two. Another interesting natural history tidbit is that some ducks leave their children in "daycare" ☺. While the adult egg-laying females go off to molt, they leave the little ones with a mature, experienced, great-grandmother type. That set-up is called a crèche. Groups of 30 to 50 ducklings have been seen in the care of a matriarch duck, but 76 is a new phenomenon. Hence: "Mom of the Year."¹

Speaking of hatchlings: little Maximus Joseph Benyola isn't exactly "**newly** hatched," but he's small enough ☺ and he's being baptized into Christ this weekend. When I left a note for our office manager Ellen confirming the baptismal date, I referred to him as "Baby Jesus Benyola." Anyone know why?? Yes, Maximus played Baby Jesus in the Sunday School Christmas pageant this past December. His carriage was preceded down the aisle by angels and wheeled in by Mary & Joseph while his actual parents Chrissy & Lenny looked on, along with his big brother Christian dressed up like a shepherd and his sister Jayda. Maximus looked like he was afloat in a cloud of gold tulle. At points only his little toes were visible!

Gasps and stage whispers of, “It’s a real baby!” echoed throughout the sanctuary. It was a wonderful Holy Trinity moment.

In 2 or 3 years Maximus will be one in a line of beautiful little ducklings following a Sunday School teacher. I think of our most seasoned teachers like Muriel Huhn, Elaine Maccanico, Frieda Davis and her daughter Janice Faas, and I’m thinking the line of ducklings they’ve led and taught far exceeds the impressive 76 that the common merganser mom in Lake Bemidji has under her wings. I’m thinking, too, of the children and youth our Director of Music Ministry Jill Ramme has taught to sing and mentored in the faith in children’s choirs far and near. What a blessing all these “mother ducks” have been and will be to young *disciples*, literally “followers,” whom they teach to love and sing to the Lord and whom they help to guide in faith and life.

Our epistle this weekend from Ephesians 3 is one of my favorites. Here’s a beautiful prayer for those we hold close to our heart:

¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of [the Father’s] glory... you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

Rooted and grounded in love.... I want that word *love* to begin with a capital L and to stand for our Lord Jesus Christ, who IS love! He is the loving Lord who in today’s Gospel feeds the multitude and walks on water, the same loving Lord who turned water into wine, gave sight to the man born blind, raised Lazarus from the dead, washed his disciples’ feet the night before he died and laid down His life so that we might live.

Knowing the Bible stories is so important.... They are not **impersonal** history that has nothing to do with us. They are **personal** history because they are the stories of **our** salvation. Scripture teaches us about the promises that God has made and about God’s

faithful keeping of those promises, even when the waiting has been long and God's children have become impatient, forgetful and faithless. Maximus will be baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a very **personal** God, who has created and redeemed us and who makes us holy. To be rooted and grounded in love is to know ourselves as the beloved children of the Most High God, forgiven sinners, grateful and joy-filled servants, set apart for devoted, faithful service to a loving Lord.

Here's a paraphrase of most of today's epistle from *The Message*:

*¹⁴My response is to get down on my knees before the Father,
¹⁵this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth.
¹⁶I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit - not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength -
¹⁷that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love,
¹⁸you'll be able to take in with all Christians the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights!
¹⁹Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.
²⁰God can do anything, you know - far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.*

Our prayer for Maximus and his parents, siblings, grandparents, godparents, and for **all** of us, is that we will be filled with the fullness of God. The difference between the little people and us adults is that they are fresh containers, holding only God and good things. Over time we can get filled up with **less-than-holy** stuff that needs to be cleared out so that there is room for God. Maybe it's not even that **unworthy** things have crept into our lives and hearts. Maybe the things that fill our hearts and schedules are all good things – but if they crowd out God, worship, service to our faith community and loving our neighbor, that is **not** good.

There's that fascinating story about the wannabe student who went to a Zen master to be taught. The master began the meeting by serving tea – until the tea he was pouring had filled the cup, overflowed the saucer and begun to run over the table and onto the floor. “What are you doing??” the wannabe student cried out in alarm. And the master answered, “You **say** you want to be taught, but you are so full of yourself there is no room for anything else. If you want to learn, you must first be emptied.”

*¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be **filled with all the fullness of God.***

²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

The mother duck who shepherds those 76 ducklings is called a **common** merganser. She seems pretty **uncommon** to me! There is also nothing common about our God or about any of the children of God (including “Baby Jesus Benyola”) or about any part of God's creation. Let's believe with all our hearts that this amazing God, this loving Lord, Love incarnate, **can** and **will** do “abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,” Including rooting and grounding us in love. Amen

¹Sarah Mervosh, “A Mother Glides Dutifully Across a Minnesota Lake, With 76 Ducklings in Tow,” *NY Times* (July 26, 2018), A20.

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