

You may never have heard of Allan Gerson, but his life story is fascinating. Gerson died a week ago today. His funeral was Wednesday at a synagogue in Washington, D.C.

Born in 1945 in central Asia, Gerson's Jewish parents lived in a labor camp in Siberia during part of the war. Later, the family came to the U.S. as undocumented migrants. When Gerson was 13, a compassionate judge granted them citizenship. Gerson identified with today's Dreamers, saying he could have been deported had it not been for that judge's action. Gerson went on to become a lawyer. During his career, he worked to prosecute Nazi war criminals who immigrated to the United States. Later he obtained a settlement for the victims of the Libyan terrorist bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 that killed 270 people in Lockerbie, Scotland. It took him more than a decade to settle that case: it involved changing the law so foreign governments could be sued for criminal action. Gerson also represented families of people killed in the 9/11 attacks.

Throughout his life, we might say that Gerson was a poster child for justice. He lived out the words of an old song by Peter, Paul and Mary, "If I Had a Hammer:"

If I had a hammer, I'd hammer in the morning,
I'd hammer in the evening, all over this land.
I'd hammer out "Danger!" I'd hammer out a warning.
I'd hammer out love between my brothers and my sisters
all over this land.

Today's Gospel reading is like that. John the Baptist hammers out "Danger!" "Repent," he yells, "for the kingdom of heaven has come near." John hammers out a warning about something he calls "the wrath to come." "Bear fruit worthy of repentance," he says. "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

John the Baptist was a wild and crazy guy - and not in a fun way, either, but in a scary way. Undoubtedly he looked scary in his camel's hair outfit. We know he sounded scary, with his confrontational, get-right-with-God, turn-before-you-burn preaching style. And nobody in their right mind would have wanted to have lunch with him - "Would you like some more bugs with your honey, Honey?" John the Baptist, who lived in the wilderness of Judea, was out at the edges of a lot more than the social and religious life of his day. He seems to have had a kind of anti-

charisma that attracted the people out into the desert, including the Sadducees and the Pharisees, to confess their sins and be baptized by him.

The Greek word from which the word baptism derives literally means to dip or to wash. John's baptism was a washing or cleansing from sin. John did not link forgiveness with the baptism he offered. He talked about repentance and bearing good fruit, i.e., changing our ways as a mark of true repentance. John was fond of fire. He said that people who did not bear good fruit would be cut down like trees and thrown into the fire. John talked about the need to be baptized with fire, too. The point of all this fire-talk is the urgent need for transformation. John never claimed that his baptism could bring that about; instead, he promised that someone else was coming whose baptism would be truly transformational.

John's harsh and terrifying words frequently lead people to believe that the all-consuming fire to come - the judgment - was his primary interest. But John's major purpose was to prepare people for the harvest to come. As one who had been sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, John was fully aware of the limitations of his baptism. That is why he looked forward to a new baptism which would be transformative, separating the chaff from the grain of the wheat. This new baptism would go right to the heart. It would strip away the chaff to get to the underlying kernel, transforming the self. Through this baptism, God would work through Jesus Christ to create humanity anew.

Twelve years ago, I lived in Tupelo, Mississippi, and served as the priest-in-charge at All Saints' Episcopal Church. Once I attended the installation of the new pastor at the Episcopal church in Starkville. As I was waiting with others for the service to begin, Bishop Duncan Gray asked me, "Do Lutherans commonly anoint people with holy water just before giving them communion?" I said it wasn't that common. Then he continued: "That was such a powerful experience for me at Bishop Gordy's installation. I've begun to use anointing with water in my ministry." Upon our arrival at the altar for communion, Bishop Gray anointed each person with holy water. I felt the coolness of the water lingering on my forehead for several minutes afterwards.

As we enter and exit the church we may remind ourselves of our baptism, dipping our fingers into the font and making the sign of the cross. But receiving anointing with holy water from the font from someone else also reminds us of the communal nature of baptism. Everything we do as the church has its root in baptism. Our baptism connects us personally to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The connection to Jesus that baptism establishes comes through the hands of others, through the community of faith. Our faith is personal, but it is not individualistic. In baptism, we are not only united with Christ - we are also united with the people of Christ, the community of the baptized, the Church.

One of C.S. Lewis' novels in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series suggests a lot about baptism. It looks at baptism from the standpoint of the individual's relationships with others, with God and with his or her own self. *The Voyage of the Dawnreader* begins like this: "There once was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it. His parents called him Eustace Clarence and his schoolmasters called him Scrubb. I can't tell you how his friends spoke to him, for he had none." So right from the outset, we learn that Eustace had some deficits in his relationships with others. His life in community was marginal at best.

Eustace falls into an adventure in Narnia with two of his cousins. The children find themselves up to their necks in the ocean. Soon they are hoisted above a ship called the Dawnreader. Eustace acts as a perfect brat on board. After several days of sailing, a storm tosses the ship onto a small island. Rather than help his shipmates repair the ship, Eustace wanders off to explore the island by himself. He sees a feeble, sickly old dragon - yes, you heard me right, a dragon - hobble out of its cave and die. Eustace goes into the cave and discovers it is full of gold, diamonds, and other valuable treasures. He immediately puts a large bracelet on his arm and falls asleep, spending the night with greedy dreams about his newfound wealth.

When Eustace awakens the following morning, he discovers he has somehow turned into a dragon himself. His shipmates soon figure out that this pitiful but frightening creature is actually rotten old Eustace, and everyone feels sorry for him, in spite of the way he had acted previously.

Then one day a strange boy shows up on the island. Soon the others realize that he is Eustace, but he is clearly a different boy from the one they'd known before. Then Eustace explains to them how he managed to quit being a dragon with the aid of a strange lion. This lion had told Eustace to take off his scaly skin and bathe in a pool of water. Eustace took off the dragon skin a number of times, but each time he discovered there was another layer remaining. Finally, the lion told him to lie down. Then the lion used his claws to dig deep into Eustace's dragon skin, so deep that Eustace feared the lion's nails would reach right down to his heart. It hurt a lot, but soon it was over and Eustace could see that ugly, knobby old dragon skin lying in a heap, away and off of him. He jumped into a pool of water and swam about - water had never felt so refreshing before. From then on, Eustace's comrades noticed a big difference in his attitude. Oh, he could still be a brat, but on the whole, Eustace was a completely different person.

Such is the sacrament of baptism. As John the Baptist said, the core of the wheat must be freed from the husk of the chaff, and no one but God is equal to that task. In the land of Narnia where Eustace was encountered by the lion, that lion,

Aslan, is a savior figure like Jesus Christ. This is one of the ways God judges us: not to punish us but to transform and restore us to life in community: community with God, with our sisters and brothers in Christ, and with all people who are created and loved by God.

Once when our daughter Hannah was four years old, I took her with me to the noonday Mass at the Catholic church in Tupelo. We dipped our fingers into the bowl of holy water in the narthex, marking our foreheads with the cross. As we left the church, I forgot about the holy water, but Hannah didn't. As she marked her forehead again, she said, "I want to keep my cross wet." Don't we all! We have a responsibility to nurture the grace given to us in our baptism. That's the danger and the warning that Advent hammers home to us. This is so we don't fall into what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," forgetting that the grace we receive cost Jesus his life. It also costs us our lives. As a prayer attributed to St. Francis concludes:

"Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."