

Baptism of the Lord - 2022

Fred Craddock tells a story of a vacation he and his wife took together in the Smoky Mountains. A distinguished older gentleman came to their table in the hotel dining room. He was, as it turned out, a celebrity -- a former governor of Tennessee. When he discovered that Craddock was a professor of preaching, the man said he had a story to tell him, a story about a preacher.

It seems that when the governor was born, his mother wasn't married. He never knew his father. Now that may not seem so unusual today, but in the Southland of that era, that made for a difficult childhood. The other children used to taunt him and call him names. They used to ask him when his father was coming back. Whenever he was out with his mother in public, he was painfully aware that he had but one parent.

One day when he was about ten, this boy was in church. Usually when the service was over, he found his way discreetly out the back door -- which meant that he never talked to the minister, never had to share his name. On this particular occasion, though, the boy got swept up in the crowd and before he knew it, there was the pastor at the front door, his hand extended. "Well, son," the preacher's voice boomed out, "whose boy are you?"

He could hardly have asked a more embarrassing question. The boy flushed and started to stammer -- but before he could say anything more, the preacher (still gripping his hand) said: "I know!... You're God's son!" He slapped him on the shoulder and said, "Boy, go claim your inheritance."

The boy never forgot that incident. He never forgot the preacher's kindness in not drawing attention to his single-parent family. He never forgot the way he sent him out either: "Go claim your inheritance!"

Long after he became one of the most popular governors in Tennessee history, this man still delighted in telling the story of the day the preacher told him he was a child of God. It was almost as though a voice had spoken from the heavens: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." That was the day the boy received the blessing.

There's an old fable that illustrates what impact blessing can have upon a life. It's the story of a fabulously wealthy king who has a son whom he adores. The boy is bright and handsome, perfect in every way except one: he has a hunchback. This saddens the king to no end. He proclaims that a rich treasure will go to the person who figures out how to heal the boy's back. Months and months pass without a solution. The wisest thinkers and most learned scholars travel to the palace from afar. But no one knows what to do. Finally, an old, wise woman happens into the kingdom and hears about the problem. "I want nothing of your treasure," she says; "but I do have the answer to your problem." The old woman directs the king to build a statue in the center of the palace courtyard, an exact replica of his son, but with one exception: its back must be perfectly straight. "That's all you have to do," she assures him. "Trust God for the healing." The king's artisans set to work, and in no time, a beautiful marble sculpture sits in the center of the courtyard. Every day, as the little boy plays, he studies the figure in admiration. He starts to say to himself, "That's me! It looks exactly like me."

Little by little, the boy's back straightens. The day comes when the king gazes out at the prince frolicking in the garden -- and realizes his son's back is totally healed. The boy's identification with the statue is so complete that he has come to believe it is him -- straight back and all. His body obeys his belief.

There's that familiar scene from the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, when the Wizard (now revealed to be nothing more than a displaced patent-medicine huckster, but still retaining some wispy remnants of his wizard's mystique) presents to each of Dorothy's three companions a gift. Along with each gift comes a kind of blessing: a medal of courage for the cowardly lion, a ticking heart-shaped watch for the hollow-chested tin woodsman, and a diploma to swell the straw-stuffed head of the scarecrow.

Courage, heart, brains: the Wizard gives these three nothing they do not already have; but it's his blessing that frees them to acknowledge their gifts and move forward.