

It seems nothing is free of controversy these days. One of the controversies out there has to do with the *Star Wars* franchise, specifically with one of the main characters in the newest *Star Wars* trilogy, the character named Rey. Rey was introduced to us in Episode 7 as a young woman living alone on a desert planet struggling to survive as a scavenger who scrounges parts from giant spaceships from the past that crash landed on the planet. There is plenty of mystery around her: while we she is a good person who stands up for the rights and well being of others, especially those who are easy to take advantage of, we have no idea how she got on the planet, where she is from, who her family is and who she really is. We also discover she is Force sensitive. For those unfamiliar with *Star Wars*, The Force is a power that connects all living things; and some people have the ability to sense it and some, with training, are able to interact with it for both good and evil intentions. All this information sets up a big question for the character called Rey: where does she belong?

This is a question we fans watched unfold during the course of the last three *Star Wars* movies; a question that was powerfully answered in the most recent movie, Episode 9 called *The Rise of Skywalker*. Some of the information needed to help answer the question of Rey's belonging had to do with who her parents were. When she was told her parents were nobodies, losers who sold her into servitude for drinking money, some fans were excited because they were attracted to the idea that someone as powerful with The Force as Rey could be someone who was a nobody and came from nowhere, someone who wasn't special. Perhaps this concept reveals more about how those fans see themselves, perhaps feeling like there is little hope for them because of how they see who their parents are or the life they live. Perhaps the concept of belonging is so deeply universal, we all explore it at some point in our lives.

But -Spoiler Alert for those who haven't seen the movie - when it was revealed that Rey's parents were descendants of the most evil villain in the franchise, the one who destroyed so many lives and worlds, there were fans who were disappointed. And while I don't want to tell anyone how to feel about a movie, I was interested how the writers of movie talked about Rey's parentage, because it had to do with belonging. The writers explained when Rey discovered she was related to the villain, the question of where she belonged took on a new and deeper level. One that calls into question a myth we often believe without realizing its negative consequences: that we are defined by our bloodlines, and that our value as human beings comes from what our family name connects us to.

Rey's character arch was written to intentionally challenge this notion because despite who her grandfather is, she was a literal ray of light in the darkness, she continued to choose the path of goodness, even when she directly confronted her evil grandfather and proved that she belonged not with the evil villain of the story but with the heroes of the franchise, the Skywalkers.

Rey's story of belonging reminds me of what the Church celebrates this Sunday as we commemorate Jesus' baptism. Biblical scholars tell us the Baptism of Jesus by John in the River Jordan is one of the few events recorded in all 4 of the Gospels, and thus is certain to have actually happened. Theologians tell us it is also controversial, because John's baptism was different from what baptism is for us modern day Christians. In John's day, baptism was a symbol of repentance for sins corporate and personal; it was a cleansing in preparation to receive the Messiah and the new day he was bringing. Which means Jesus being baptized by John makes some people feel uncomfortable, because we understand Jesus to be God's Son, a person without sin, the very Messiah who had come, God Incarnate dwelling among us in the flesh. So, the question is what was he doing getting baptized by John? Surely standing in the river with sinners isn't where he belonged, is it?

If we look closely at today's Gospel, even John the Baptist seems uncomfortable that Jesus showed up to be baptized by him. The author of Matthew's Gospel states this objection strongly, writing John wanted to prevent the baptism, meaning he didn't want to do it. But Jesus' insisted saying it was the right thing to do at that time. The word the author of today's Gospel used is righteous. Righteous in the Biblical sense doesn't mean "being correct", it means doing what God wants. In being baptized Jesus was being obedient, following God's plan, God's desires, not John's, and not yours or mine.

Jesus was showing what the Incarnation looks like after that baby in the manger grew up. Being God in flesh dwelling on earth didn't look like Jesus riding around in a golden carriage being pulled by white horses waving at folks from behind a curtain. Jesus didn't use his divinity to separate himself from humanity, especially the worst parts of humanity, the sinful stuff that causes harm and separation. Instead Jesus chose to belong with all of humanity, especially those who suffer the effects of sin, and those in need of repentance, and change.

That is the baptism of Jesus, the Son of God. This is how he chose to show us what He came to do: to restore relationship with God, to save us from ourselves, from the sin we chose to love instead of God and our neighbors.

And speaking of love, God's love comes into Jesus baptism in ways powerfully visual and audible with the heavens opening up, with the Spirit of God descending like a dove and a Voice from heaven being heard to say, "This is my Son, the beloved with

whom I am well pleased.” Incidentally, the term “well pleased” could be translated delighted. I love the idea of God delighting in people and things. It reminds me of the very beginning, back in Genesis when God created the world and everything in it and God said over and over again, “it is good.” There is delight in that. Remember, in the beginning God created humanity in God’s image – all of humanity, not just a single gender, race or class, go ahead and read it for yourself- and God declared delight in creation of humanity. It is good.

Perhaps Jesus standing in the river, dripping with the water of his baptism choosing to belong with humanity is like going back to the beginning. Reminding us of our connection to our creator, in whose image we are made, who is forever a part of us, even when we choose to forget. That is where we belong, not just a few of us but all of us, with our creator who delights in us.

Sometimes it is good to hear that reminder that God loves us, and God delights in us. That we bring God joy. Not by what we do, or who our parents are, or what town we are from, or even what we do for a living, but just by our being. If you hear nothing else I say today, I hope and pray you hear that God delights in you.

Now, I know there plenty of folks who want to step in and remind us of all the ways humanity falls short, another way of saying sin; that we do all kinds of damage and cause each other all kinds of pain. History and our own individual lives are full of examples. And there are even theologians who say all this sin is evidence that humans not only forgot who we belong to and who we belong with, we turned our backs on God to the extent that we are forever bad, we are all born with a defect, a default mode that says we have lost the ability to choose God’s will and will always choose our own. That our human nature is one of sin, that we are bad, and that is why Jesus came, because only by his sacrifice can we be acceptable to God. And while I won’t deny there are people who may exemplify this, there are others who prove that there are people throughout history and in scriptures who chose to live in ways that follow or at least attempt to follow God’s will. Sometimes it’s just easier to think we’re bad because it might mean little is expected from us when it comes to following Jesus’ example of following God’s ways.

But that is not what I see in today’s Gospel. Jesus’ baptism shows us God still loves all humanity, and in that love, there is hope for redemption, and change, and one way we show our love for God is how the Church does baptism today. Whenever we baptize someone, be they infant, child, teenager or adult, we are saying who we choose to belong with: God through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection and this is our delight, our joy. In a world that does have so much suffering, we choose joy, we choose belonging to a love that is so powerful it transforms death into life, a life that is belonging to God and each other.

Of course, it is easy to forget this belonging, especially with so many causes for distraction that we come face to face with every day. That is why on special celebrations like Jesus' baptism, the Church gives us the option of remembering our belonging by renewing our commitment, the one we made in our baptism or the one made for us if we were baptized as infants. In just a minute or two we are going to do just that. And as I do every time we renew those Baptismal Vows, I encourage you to pay close attention to each and every word we say, notice if one word or phrase stands out to you and take that home with you, make it your focus of prayer and study and practice for the week or month. These vows describe how we are to follow Jesus, they are a summary of what we believe and how we put those beliefs into everyday practices, the core values that influence each and every choice we make: where we shop, how we treat people, how we spend our time, how we choose to see the people around us whether they are people we like or dislike. Each and every vow is an opportunity for us to live into that delight and joyful love of God and be rays of light in the world, shining with God's love. It's a life we share, with each other, and the Holy Spirit, who is with us and gives us what we need to live what we believe.