

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

Austin, Texas

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January 8, 2012

The Baptism of Jesus, Mark 1:4-11

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. Amen.

Good morning!

Today, the first Sunday after the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6, we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, one of the four, primary baptismal feasts of our liturgical year. While Jesus' baptism opens Mark's Gospel, for us still emerging from that happy fog of the Christmas season, the event follows the humble birth of the infant King and the Holy Family's escape from the blood-thirsty Herod, the naming of the Child in the Temple and the faithful journey of the Magi.

In the Allen home, John's baptism of Jesus interrupts the deep rumbling of a Harley-Davidson procession and the heavily tattooed, leather-clad bikers riding their chrome steeds, for you see, despite my abiding loyalty to I Luv Video, Vulcan Video, and our local, brick-and-mortar movie rental businesses, Missy and I joined The Netflix just before Christmas. Taken in companion with my recent entre to The Facebooks, and my having finally watched an episode of *30 Rock*, my commitment to finally become a part of 2006 has now reached a fever pitch.

Sometime during Christmas week, Missy and I streamed the pilot episode of *Sons of Anarchy*, an FX television series that opened in 2008. What followed was eight successive late-nights of my edge-of-our-seats couch-potato binging that saw us work our way through no less than thirty-nine, hour-long episodes...all after the kids had been put to bed. Needless to say, I am now ready for a nap, to restore a late-70's hog and earn my "cut," that is, my leather jacket announcing my membership in the Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club, Redwood Original, or as the acronym reads for short: "SAMCRO."

Set in the small town of Charming, California, the program ranges from violent to vulgar, and from serious to silly. A crime drama that ends most episodes with a soap opera-worthy cliffhanger, *Sons of Anarchy* demonstrates equal parts *Hill Street Blues* and *Falcon Crest*, *The Sopranos* and *Melrose Place*.

The program's central protagonist is Jackson "Jax" Teller, a thirty-something wrestling a complicated inheritance from his father, John Thomas Teller, who has died some fifteen years before we viewers meet the Club. John Thomas Teller was "First 9," one of the founding members of the motorcycle club, or MC, in the late 1960's. Forming the MC with several of his fellow Vietnam infantrymen, Teller originally envisioned the Club as a family of misfits and cast-offs, a band of brothers who would care for one another; protect their small town's way of life; and work as partners in an automotive repair business.

During the next twenty-five years, however, the Sons of Anarchy expanded "charters" – franchises of the "Redwood Original" club who pay a kickback to the mother MC – and the focus of their growing collective shifted to the illegal weapons trade and bloody turf wars with rival motorcycle gangs.

John Thomas Teller wrote of his disappointment with the MC's direction in a tome he entitled, *The Rise and Fall of Sam Crow*. In the series' first episode, his son, Jackson, discovers the journal while preparing for the birth of his own son, and Jax begins reading his father's words and sharing his father's questions of their club.

Since his father's death, Jax's mother, Gemma, has remarried to another member of the First 9, Clay Morrow. Gemma and Clay protect the Club at all costs: by bullying, by blood, by betrayal, by whatever means they deem necessary. For Jax, the Sons of Anarchy have loved him more and longer than anyone else in his life, but that love has left no room for the vulnerability he more authentically feels or the call to lay down arms that he now hears from his father's typed pages.

SAMCRO members and their "old ladies" – their wives and steady girlfriends, as they are known – have been battered by their way of life. Perhaps the series' most striking visual trope, the faces of the Sons and their families are always – *always* – bruised: black eyes, fat lips, and bloody stitches. Yet, as powerfully contradictory as are Jax's stony face and his tender heart, so, too, does the orderliness of the Sons of Anarchy's organization contradict their chaotic lifestyle. The MC operates democratically, with votes taken according to Robert's Rules of Order during formal business meetings known colloquially as "attending church." Gathering around a large, redwood table – an altar carved with the Club's Grim Reaper logo – the Sons work their way through an agenda reporting on recent goings-on and their planning for upcoming events. The scene might be Hunter S. Thompson's vision of a Vestry meeting, as the elected officers – President and Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, and Sergeant-at-Arms – gavel their "church" services open and close.

Following these meetings, Jax often takes to the flat roof of Teller-Morrow automotive to smoke a cigarette; run his hands through his long, *filthy* blonde hair; and read his father's words. Meanwhile, we viewers enjoy the benefit of John Thomas Teller's voice, reading aloud what his son reads to himself.

And late one of those binging nights as I wondered how in heaven this show had sucked me so thoroughly into its world, I, like Jackson, found great resonance in one of his father's writings. John Teller read: "I realized that in my downward spiral of hopelessness [for the world and in the Club] I was actually falling into a huge hole created by my absence of basic human graces. The most obvious was forgiveness. If I was wronged by anyone, in or out of the club, I had to be compensated by money or blood. There was no turning the other cheek. [And] When relationships [had] become a ledger of profit and loss, [I discovered that I had] no friends, no loved ones, just pluses and minuses. [I was] absolutely alone...[And] *When relationships [had] become a ledger of profit and loss, [I discovered that I had] no friends, no loved ones, just pluses and minuses. [I was] absolutely alone.*"

Not many of us (if any of us) are the sons of a motorcycle club president, and we attend church here at Good Shepherd, not the booze-y clubhouse behind an auto shop. But, when no one's watching, do we not thumb our most well-remembered scars, and, as proudly as the Sons of Anarchy display their stitches and black eyes, do we not, just as carefully, seek to hide our own bruises...but we *are* bruised, aren't we. And do we not keep that same relational ledger of profit and loss, of sins for and against our neighbors, our parents, our children, our business partners, so that when we have been wronged we *seek compensation*, if not by money or blood,

then by passive-aggressive guilt of the ones we love and upon whom we most depend. So often, we do not want to be reconciled...we want to *right*.

The power of *Sons of Anarchy*, and stories like it, is their capacity to invite us to see ourselves differently – and all the better when the world they present is radically different from the one with which we are most familiar. We begin to see ourselves through their looking glass, straddling chrome as a part of the Reaper Crew’s noisy procession, rather than as penitents processing down this aisle in silk ties and in pleated skirts. And, if we can muster the courage and the honesty, we can see goodness even in these figures of malevolence. Moreover, we can recognize those occasions when our feeding at this altar would seem to be as contradictory as Sam Crow’s talk of love and their odd habits of order.

But it doesn’t have to be this way: brutal and bruising and unforgiving.

John Thomas Teller observes that a family built upon the absence of “basic human graces” was no family at all, and, likewise, John the Baptist preaches the same, inviting vulnerability – repentance, admission of wrong – and offering forgiveness. This “forgiveness of sins” is not a theological formula spoken only in these pews. The forgiveness of sins is God’s promise that we will never be left alone, for no matter egregious our offense, God’s love will be unrelenting. Yes, God’s desire to forgive will always overcome our corrupt desire to do ill. To begrudge, to revenge, to seek victory rather than reconciliation, supremacy, rather than union...all of these are decisions to be alone, to separate ourselves from one another...but for the God who loves us enough to send his child to be born in our world and baptized in our waters, being alone has never been an option.

For what do we accomplish in baptism if not *this* forgiveness of sins, the celebratory receipt of this, God’s promise, that God will be with us. Like Jackson Teller, we – all of us – are inheritors of complicated bequeath: the world demands competition, while our God invites cooperation. And if we are to be faithful and honor God’s gift – not only on Sunday mornings, but during the week that leads us here – we will have to choose humility as our strength and meekness as our power, and reconciliation as the only victory we seek.