



MATTIA PRETI

Baptism's True Claim:

***To wade in the water is to be immersed in our Lord's
perverse ethic of gain through loss***

by Ched Myers

Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann, writer, activist, and longtime editor of *The Witness* magazine, died on December 31, 2005, after more than seven years of struggle with brain cancer. Jeanie was married to Bill Wylie-Kellermann and was the mother of two daughters, Lydia and Lucy. This article is adapted from a sermon preached on the occasion of her memorial service in Detroit on January 8, 2006.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?
—Romans 6:3

Just a year before Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann collapsed in the bathroom of her home with the first seizure of what would become the long journey that ended on New Year's Eve 2005, she was the keynote speaker at the 1997 Finger Lakes Conference in Geneva, N.Y. The theme of that gathering was "The Politics of Baptism." Jeanie spoke about how she had struggled with whether to baptize her daughter Lydia when she was an infant. In an article she wrote for the Detroit Catholic Worker paper some years before, Jeanie reflected on her protective impulses:

Water, words, community. Offering our child back to God. We would stand with Abraham at the sacrifice. We would give her to a God who models the cross. We would invite her to listen for a voice calling in the night, to vigil, to put herself at risk, to leave family and friends, to speak clearly a truth for which one can be executed. We would thereby invite her into the risks we have already elected and, by God's grace, still will elect to take with our own lives. In the act of baptism we would wash away the possibility that our concern for her might justify a diminishing of our own obedience to our Lord's perverse ethic of vulnerability and gain through loss.

These concerns reflect not only Jeanie's well-known charism for fierce honesty, but also how seriously she took the baptismal covenant, which she believed demanded an active commitment to justice, to solidarity with marginalized people, and to personal integrity. She also knew these things are marks of costly discipleship.

I suspect she inherited these convictions from her family, her church, and her political work. She also knew their roots in the gospel itself. The gospel of Mark offers us the story of Jesus' baptism by John in the river Jordan (Mark 1:4-11), a famous scene that our tradition has overly sentimentalized and underappreciated. I want to note four strands in Mark's version of the story that I imagine might have informed Jeanie's conundrum.

First, of all the mentors Jesus of Nazareth might have chosen, he makes his way to a politically

notorious prophet whose own days are numbered because of his vocation of speaking truth to power. Mark portrays John the Baptist as a re-embodiment of the great prophet Elijah (Mark 1:6). He wants us to be clear that Jesus is opting to follow in the footsteps of this tradition of prophecy, which animates public conscience (however inconvenient that may be to the nation's leadership) and which relentlessly advocates on behalf of the least. John's message is one of "repentance," which is a call to a whole people to change their historic direction, not just their hearts. Jesus will take up this same proclamation after John is thrown into Herod's prison.

Clearly Jeanie understood and embraced this aspect of the baptismal tradition. She chronicled the struggle of Poletown residents resisting General Motors' destruction of their neighborhood, organized solidarity with striking *Detroit Free Press* newspaper workers, insisted upon gender justice in all venues, and vigiled fiercely for peace. In this she was a follower of John and Jesus.

A second notable strand in Mark's story is its wilderness location. We are told that everyone comes from the center of society to meet John at the margins (Mark 1:5). This means to remind us of the origins of Exodus Israel's faith. The biblical God stands outside civilization, undomesticated and wild, and is most reliably encountered not in the vortex of power, but in the void. John himself is a feral figure in dress and diet, and Jesus will, immediately after baptism, be driven deeper into the wilderness on his own vision quest (Mark 1:12f). Their common experiment in prophetic renewal understood the need to retrace the footsteps of the ancestors to find out what went wrong: Only a radical diagnosis of root causes could bring the possibility of healing.

Later in her life Jeanie was increasingly drawn to earth spirituality and a deeper relationship with the land and with the ancestors. So she also understood this part of the baptism story: that we are called out of conventional social constructs of conforming religion and spiritualized or intellectualized theologies toward a wilder discipleship more grounded in the creation.

A third noteworthy detail in Mark's depiction is the fact that while everyone else is being baptized **in** (Greek *en tō*) the Jordan, Jesus is baptized **into** (Greek *eis ton*) the river (Mark 1:9). Herman Waetjen contends that this signifies Jesus' more thoroughgoing defection from the dominant culture, his dive deeper into the depths of the older, wiser tradition, his complete immersion in the alternative vision of God's kingdom.

Jeanie understood this, too. She didn't do anything halfway, and it seemed like she interrogated everything, often in the pages of *The Witness*, the social justice magazine in the Episcopal tradition that she edited. Indeed, she was at her best when she was challenging conventions—those of the dominant society and church as well as of the social movements we are part of—even as she struggled to imagine alternatives. As has been said of her, Jeanie, like the Magi, went home by a different way.

So Jeanie correctly grasped the conundrum of the gospel tradition of baptism. On one hand she worried about how to prevent her daughter's baptism from being a mere ritual of nominal church membership. On the other, she feared for Lydia because of the consequences of baptism's true claim and cost. A fourth aspect of Mark's story, however, gives us a clue how we might bear this formidable contradiction.

Jesus rises from Jordan's waters to a vision of the "heavens rent asunder" (1:10). This alludes to Isaiah's poignant lament: "Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down to make known your name to your enemies and make the nations tremble at your presence, working unexpected miracles" (Isaiah 64:1f).

Indeed, from the prophetic perspective, which is firmly located among the marginalized, there is much to lament, then and now. The racist treatment of Hurricane Katrina victims; a federal budget that

shamelessly subsidizes the rich and squeezes the poor; the plight of prisoners at Guantánamo; the long silence that surrounded our kidnapped Christian Peacemaker Team brothers in Iraq. Our most visceral sense of justice longs for the truth to come out, for the violence to end, for reconciliation at last.

Yet in the moment of Jesus' baptism as narrated by Mark, this prophetic longing is realized: The heavens are rent asunder, the Spirit descends, and the long-silent voice is heard. Modernists cringe at such tales of "supernatural intervention," but I believe this moment holds the key to a true understanding of baptism. Down Jesus goes, getting to the bottom of things, fully absorbed into the waters. Up he arises in a mystical trance: He is staring into heaven, up Jacob's ancient ladder, into the axis mundi, through a cosmic wormhole opened up right there in the streambed. It's a pillar of fire, the eye of the storm.

What does he see? More than a dove, I'm guessing. I think he sees it all. He sees how good the world is, ecstatically experiencing the untamed, juicy power woven into all of creation. He sees how bad it is: alienated and degraded, hostage to the powers of greed and objectification and domination. And he sees a vision of the redemption of everything. Then Jesus hears the voice (Mark 1:11), which both affirms his filial identity and demands a rupture with business as usual. It is his commissioning by the One who refuses to give up on us, refuses to compromise with us, and refuses to leave us stranded.

This moment could not be more incredible. Yet it doesn't beam Jesus up out of the weary world into blissful, Docetic communion with the divine, as our modern eschatological fantasies of salvation-as-escape would script it. No, he remains right there in Jordan's muddy flow, still a member of a subject people in a land occupied by an imperial army, surrounded by grinding poverty and refugees and illness. Jesus is stuck with us in our murderous history, and this apocalyptic vision doesn't rescue him from it, as if it were some cosmic lottery ticket or "get out of jail free" card. Rather, Jesus' vision at the Jordan compels him to struggle in and with that history, even unto death, but with a liberated sense of both his own humanity and that of others, even his enemies. As Audre Lorde famously put it, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

It is this wild baptism into discipleship, John reminds us, that Jesus offers us ("I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," Mark 1:8). Jeanie apprehended and embraced it with eyes wide open, not only in health, but in so many mysterious ways even after her cancer and the innumerable surgeries, when her countenance was transformed from the warrior we knew into an inscrutable angel smiling so sweetly. I wonder whether in these last years she somehow already had a foot in that Jordan wormhole, which has now swallowed her wholly into transfiguration. And it was this baptism from which her protective maternal instincts also wanted to spare her daughters. After all, in Mark's story, the rending of the heavens at the Jordan becomes, at the end, the rending of the temple's veil as Jesus expires on Calvary (Mark 15:38)—a reminder of the essential connection between baptism and the cross.

We can never know what shape this cross will take in our lives. Lydia and Lucy were indeed baptized as infants. Yet have not the past seven difficult years represented their true immersion, as they watched their beloved mother fade, caretaking their caretaker? No ritual of water, this long and wearying journey. Rather, a baptism of excruciating fire, and of exhilarating Spirit.

Now, dear ones—Bill, Lydia, Lucy—we are gathered at the river for a different ritual, sending dear Jeanie upstream to the great headwaters. "And the River is humming," goes the song (from "Por que cantamos," by Mario Benedetti). You have lived up to your baptisms, as did Jeanie. I dare say that with you God is also well-pleased. We are here because of your faithfulness, and "that is why we sing." I know it is the desire of everyone here today, and the hundreds of others around the country who we represent and the ancestors who hover here, that you would feel our love, our deep respect, our solidarity, and our accompaniment surrounding you like a healing quilt, holding you and keeping you. It

is all we have together—and it is an almost unbelievable goodness. This is how we navigate this passage: We sing Jeanie over, and she prays us forward.

So, as the contemporary hymn by Bob Franke puts it:

*Sweetness in the air,
and justice on the wind,
laughter in the house
where the mourners had been.
...the standards of death
taken down by surprise.
Alleluia, the great storm is over,
lift up your wings and fly!*

Now, may the One who commissions us through baptism grant you a season of recuperation and renewal, that you might continue in the way in which your beloved wife and mother walked, until you are reunited on the other side of that magical Jordan.

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Below left: Jeanie Wylie Kellermann holding a copy of her *Poletown: A Community Betrayed* book;
Below right: L to R: Lucy, Bill, and Lydia Wylie Kellermann at Jeanie's memorial service in Detroit.

