

A Baptized Identity
A Sermon for January 8, 2016
Matthew 3:13-17
Lansdowne UMC

In our reading from the Gospel of Matthew, we heard one of the events from Jesus' life that is recorded in one way or another by all four Gospels-- Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Jesus is baptized.

This is surprising in and of itself. Even John who baptizes him is surprised. John called people to repentance. He told them to end their rebellion against God and to turn the the way of faithfulness. This doesn't seem to apply to Jesus, particularly. Jesus has been faithful to God. But if that's the case, then why is he baptized?

I believe that Jesus did it for the same reason he did everything: out of faithfulness to God and for our sakes. The fact that Jesus submitted himself to be baptized means that we are able to witness one of the most extraordinary events in all of scripture.

Jesus is baptized and as he comes out of the water, heaven breaks open. We are told that the Spirit of God descends like a dove, and it comes to rest on him. And then a voice sounds from heaven, "this is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The voice comes from heaven and says, "that's my boy!"

I don't know about you, but when it comes down to it, that's the confirmation I'm looking for in my life. I want God to look at my life-- the decisions I'm making, the ways I'm spending my time, the people

that I'm loving and caring for-- I want God to look at all of that and say, "You're my son. You make me happy."

It makes me so sad to see people that have the mentality that because God is forgiving, we should just do what we want and hope to be forgiven. You know what I'm talking about. I think we have all considered this method from time to time. You try to figure out where the line is that you shouldn't cross, and you do all you can to dance right up to that line without crossing it. Of course with that mentality, you always cross the line. You always trespass.

But what if you lived your life in the other direction. What if you danced with God instead of dancing with that boundary line. What if your whole life was simply yearning to hear that voice: you are my son, you are my daughter. Well done.

There is this ancient prayer-- at least a 1000 years old. It's called the Collect for purity. We've prayed it in the past six months, so maybe you'll recognize it. It goes like this:

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord.

What would happen if God answered that prayer, exactly as it was asked? What would happen if you became so filled with the Holy Spirit that all of the thoughts of your heart were cleansed. Your life wasn't always dancing dangerously close the trespassing line. What if you

didn't want to sin... and what if you had complete power to *not* sin. What would that look like? What would it look like, as the prayer says, to perfectly love God? What would it look like to worthily magnify God's holy name?

What would your life look like from the outside? How would your life appear to be going?

You'd be doing better than everyone else, right? You'd be more successful? You wouldn't have difficulties in your life, right? Well, we sure have the temptation to think that. The temptation is to think that if we lived our lives perfectly on the inside that our lives would look great on the outside.

But check this out: we actually have an example of this happening. There was one Person who was completely led by the Spirit and completely pleasing to God. How did his life go? What were the results? We see the trajectory of things in the very next verse following the story about his baptism. Chapter 4 verse one reads, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil."

What should we make of this? Sometimes the message that we receive at church, is that committing yourself to God means that your life will go smoothly. But Jesus' life is a testimony that exactly the opposite is true. (You can tell, I'm not out to make a sales pitch this morning. Or if I am, it's not a very compelling one. But God help us to see the truth.) Do you see what happens? The Spirit brings God's love and strength and peace into your life. The Spirit allows you to hear, "that's my boy. That's my girl."

But with that, the Spirit drives you to places of discomfort, conflict, and even temptation and difficulty. Why is that? I believe that it's because these are the very mission fields for which the baptized are anointed. The Spirit trains us to depend completely on God, while actually enabling us to depend completely on God.

Let's flip this around. I want to submit to you that if your life is absolutely spiritually comfortable-- if there is not holy discontent from the inside and no opposition whatsoever from the outside, then you're probably not being led by the Spirit of God. Because being led by the Spirit-- being on the path to doing great things for God-- that means discomfort. It means uneasiness. It means peace and contentment on the one hand, because you know that ultimately your life is secure with Christ in God. But the Spirit of God drives Christians out of their ease and into difficult places of need. The promise of the Spirit is not an easy road, but the power and presence of God along the way.

Jesus seems to see this uneasiness as mingled up with baptism. There are times when Jesus talks about his march to the suffering and death of the cross as itself a type of baptism. Speaking to his disciples in Mark chapter 10, referring to his death, he says, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

It's as if his journey of faithfulness creates a tension within him-- a discontent that will not be gone until his work is not complete. He says in Luke chapter 12, "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!"

If I lost you there, my point is simply this: baptism should come with a warning label. That's because since the early church and since Jesus himself, baptism has been understood as claiming the suffering and death of Jesus. Paul says in Romans chapter 6, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"

Your life does not get easy because you're baptized. It's rather the opposite. As Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury says, "You don't go down into the waters of the Jordan without stirring up a great deal of mud."¹ Baptism is us letting our defenses down. Letting God overwhelm us.

But the story doesn't end there. The promise of baptism is that when we emerge on the other side of the water, by God's power the same thing can happen to us that happened to Jesus. The Spirit comes to rest upon us and allows us to hear the voice of God say, "you are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter." And if we are sons and daughters, then we are able by the Spirit to pray the prayer that Jesus prayed, the prayer that characterized the heart of the early church: "Abba, Father." That is the simply prayer of the heart of the Christian. Someone who has received the Spirit of God is assured of God's love as a loving parent.

And as God assures us that we are accepted, we are loved, we're able to be the people that we were created to be. We're able to live out the calling of all humanity.

¹ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 5.

In the reading from Isaiah, we hear that the one on whom God's Spirit rests is appointed to bring justice to the nations. God says "I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; *I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.*" (Isa 42:6).

The Spirit of God comes to believers in order to make them a light to the world. The Spirit of God comes to confirm us in God's love, but also to anoint us for mission in and to the world.

When speaking of Jesus' own work in the world, the church has traditionally talked about Jesus' roles as prophet, priest, and king. Prophet, priest, and king. The surprise of baptism-- the surprise of associating ourselves closely with the person and work of Christ-- is that Jesus' vocation rubs off on us. We too come to be characterized by these roles.

"Really, preacher? Prophets, Priests, and Kings?"

What could that possibly mean for those of us who don't usually think of ourselves in such... dramatic roles? Let's take them one at a time.

What does it mean to be a prophet? Many people, when they think about prophets, think about someone who would tell the future. That might be part of a prophet's role, but at the core, the prophets role is to always be challenging the community to be the people that they are meant to be. Now of course the flip side of calling people back to faithfulness to God is the reality that continued disobedience will have consequences. Biblical prophets tend to name those consequences in no uncertain

terms, which, sadly, is usually a prediction the future. Nevertheless the prophet's key job is to remind people what they're there for-- what their purpose is. It's to remind them of the gift that God has given them and to remind them to use it faithfully.

How do we actually live that out? Please understand, I don't want us to just go around nagging one another. We start first with our own lives. Every person who is baptized needs to be striving to show other what faithfulness looks like in our circumstances. But reality is that from time to time, each of us will probably need a gentle nudge-- a reminder of what's important. We have to refocus on our mission of making disciples for the transformation of the world. We need to think about our actions through those lenses.

Sure, we'll mess it up, most likely. But when we mess up, we don't condemn one another. We remind each other of the forgiveness that God offers. We go back to basics, to the voice that calls to us from the waters of baptism. "I love you. You are forgiven. You are my son. You are my daughter."

What about our priestly role? The New Testament uses the language of the church as a "Royal Priesthood." But what does it mean to be a priest? We don't have those in the Methodist church, right?

Well, a priest is essentially a bridge-builder. A priest finds the places where the relationship between God and humanity has been trashed. And a priest goes and stands there. So baptized people are in the bridge-building business. We attempt to help people come closer to God, recognizing that our ultimate role is to point people to Christ. Christ is

the only true bridge between God and humanity, since he is both fully God and fully human. So as priests, we guide people to the one who can bring them into the presence of the Father.

Finally, because we are sons and daughters of the king, we are a *royal* priesthood. We have a great inheritance that God has prepared for us. The biblical vision of a good ruler is one who leads others to faithfully worship God, to care for the poor, and to bring justice to those who are in need. Living out that royal calling with faithfulness means that we shape our lives in the direction caring for the needy and the oppressed just as God does. We use whatever power we have, first over ourselves, to defend those whom others exploit.

Notice how all of these things balance one another out. Imagine that we were only prophets. We'd just go around nagging each other all the time. We'd be shrill nay-sayers to one another and to the world. I don't think the world needs more of that. I don't think the church needs more of that.

Imagine that we were only priests. We would be in danger of never addressing the difficult problems and questions, but we'd move so quickly to reconciling humanity and God that it would just whitewash deep problems.

Imagine that we were only royal. We would constantly be thinking in terms of power and of control and of problem solving, as if power and activism was the heart of our faith.

Jesus didn't just balance these three interests. In him they are inseparable. Present in all of his work and words.

So as I close I just want to ask you this: how close are you to your baptism? Most of us, I'm sure, were baptized as infants. But do you want to hear again the voice of God saying, "you are my son", "you are my daughter"? Return to it and find out who you are.