

Matthew 3:13-17; The Baptism of Our Lord A; 1/8/2023
Pastor Ellen Schoepf

I have a friend who, when discussing people or individuals, will often say, “That person has a unique story, and his/her story should be honored.” I share this statement because on this day, it is important to remember that each one of us has an important story to share about **our** identity, about who we are as a person. You see, every single one of us has a valuable story to tell about the priceless identity each one of us has been given in baptism. Today, as we remember and give thanks for our baptisms, we remember these words that were spoken over us, “Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and **marked** with the cross of Christ in your life – **forever.**”

Think about that! Wow! What a story that is to tell!

Today’s gospel reading gives us the story of Jesus’ baptism. Now, quite honestly, John did not know what to do with the fact that Jesus came to **him** to be baptized. And, from the time Jesus first presented himself for baptism by John until today, Christians have puzzled over why Jesus had to be baptized. At that time, the act of baptism **was** understood to be an act of repentance and the cleansing of one’s sins. So, John does not understand why Jesus, whose sandals John is “not worthy to carry” should

seek to be baptized. Instead, John declares to Jesus, “I need to be baptized by **you**.” Why should the Son of God need to be baptized?

Theologian, Frederick Dale Bruner, says that he considers Jesus’ first miracle to have occurred at his baptism. The miracle is that Jesus was **humble**. The divine Son of God humbles himself by allowing John to baptize him. This act of humility is an act of obedience to God and an act of pure love as Jesus begins his ministry. This first action Jesus takes as he begins his ministry is to deeply enter into solidarity with all of humankind and all of creation. Jesus did not need to be forgiven. However, **for us**, he goes down to the river of repentance **with** all the other sinners to be baptized. He willingly enters into the depths of human life and is baptized. And, Jesus’ baptism, his **first** adult act as recorded in Matthew’s gospel, gives us a clear indication of how he will act for his entire ministry and life. The Son of God, out of love for human beings and all of creation, comes down to us and with us, on our level, identifying with our needs and our brokenness. His baptism, then, foreshadows how his life will also end, on the cross. In his death, Jesus experiences the worst we could ever experience as mortal humans. But, because Jesus united with us in baptism, we are united with him in both his death and resurrection. Through

his **humility**, Jesus comes down to us in the depths of our humanity and shows us that we are **beloved!** He shows us that God loves **us!**

Yes, there definitely is a story to tell about baptism. I love what Richard Rohr says when talking about this aspect of Jesus' ministry. He writes, *“Jesus did **not** come to change the mind of God about humanity. Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.”* Just think about that. *“Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity. Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.”*

Yes, Jesus came to proclaim that **we** are God's beloved! You see, it is all about what God in Christ has done for us! Remember, when Jesus was baptized and the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove, a voice from heaven said, “This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” That word “beloved” is such a beautiful word. To be beloved is to be adored. To be beloved is to be cherished and to be treasured. And, this is also the promise given to **us** in our baptism. You see, baptism is first and foremost an act of **God**. It is about God claiming us as God's very own, as God's **beloved** children. It is **all** about God declaring to us that we belong to God. And, because we belong to God, baptism is about God telling us that God is well pleased with **us!**

Now, I don't know about you, but I think that is a story each one of us should be proclaiming from the mountaintops. It is a story about **our identity!** We no longer need to work so hard to justify ourselves or our existence because we have been given this priceless identity. We are **beloved** by God and God is **pleased** with us! I am beloved by God and God is pleased with me! And, it is all because of what **God** has done!

Yet, that is not always the story we tell ourselves. Quite honestly, many of us have another story that runs in our head. Sometimes we call this storyteller the inner critic, that one who reminds us of just what a failure we are, or reminds us of the way we think people may only be pretending to like us. You know, if they really knew the truth about me, they would run away. That inner critic sometimes tells us we are not attractive enough or talented enough or clever enough or intelligent enough to be beloved, let alone have someone be pleased with us. I know this because I have experienced that inner critic far too often. And so, in our brokenness, we desperately do all **kinds** of things as we attempt to justify our existence, just so we can measure up! Or, we listen to another story, the story the world often tells us. You know what **that** story is, the one that says to be truly beloved you must possess something: money, house, good looks, great physical physique, much power.

That's why we **need** to tell this baptism story over and over again – to counter the story of the inner critic, and to counter the story the **world** often tells. Yes, we tell **our** baptismal story over and over to counter the stories that make us feel as though we don't measure up or that we don't belong. You see, we **need** to remember our **true** identity, remember how **deeply** we are loved, and we **need** to hear that story told to us over and over again and celebrate this precious gift!

But, there is yet more to celebrate about this gift of baptism! The story of baptism is not only that we belong to God and are **beloved** by God; it is a story that we belong to **each other**, that we are a part of a **community**, that we are part of a **larger** story of God's presence in the world. You see, we, who sometimes feel rejected because we just don't measure up, are chosen to be a part of something **big** and **beautiful**. Just as God has chosen us in our baptism, God has also made us members of God's family! We are part of God's kingdom. So, it is important that we come **together** in worship, not only because we need to hear over and over again that God loves us and has claimed us as beloved children, cherished and treasured. We also **need** to come together in worship because our wells sometimes have run dry and we need to feel those refreshing waters of baptism trickling over us, washing over us again and

again. Quite honestly, sometimes life is just so hard we have no words to pray or no songs to sing; we are just that empty. Sometimes it's the **community** of the **baptized** that sings those hymns we can't always sing, and sometimes it's the **community** that prays the prayers we can't always pray, and sometimes it's the **community** that speaks the words of faith that we might have trouble speaking ourselves or even believing ourselves. And, we just deeply **need** to let those words and songs and prayers **wash over us, reminding** us of God's love, **reminding** us that in the waters of baptism, God has called us and claimed us as God's own, beloved, delightful and cherished children!

Jesus entered that baptismal river to become **one** with humanity and to tell us we are **beloved**. **That** is the story of baptism and the story of **our** baptisms. That is the mark we carry, and it is our **identity**. That's a story worth living **in**. And, that is a story worth telling, over and over and over again! Thanks be to God.