

“Because I Love You”

Isaiah 43: 1-7, Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

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What really happens when someone is baptized? That is perhaps the million dollar question of our faith. I imagine all Christians ponder this question at one time or another. Why should we bring our infant children to receive a sacrament when they will never remember receiving it? Can such a baptism wash away the sins of one so little or is it a rite of initiation, the beginning of a journey of faith initiated by the deep and profound love of one's parents? Perhaps we should follow the lead of our Baptist brothers and sisters or members of the early church and insist that a person reach the “age or reason and consent” in order to receive this sacrament? What age would that be? What would you need to know and profess before you were ready to be baptized? If there were such a test would any of us pass? Is the Holy Spirit at work in this sacrament in a way that is an example of pure grace, something we can only be thankful for and never fully comprehend? Some people describe baptism as an outward sign of an inward grace. This is the essence of the age old debate on baptism. I hope none of you bring this sermon to the attention of my seminary preaching professors because I think I just violated every rule of preaching by beginning an entire sermon with a string of questions!

Sometimes it is essential to ponder the deep questions that surround the mysteries of our faith. What happens in baptism is a mystery, no matter what you read or what well learned people tell you. Baptism is one of the most sacred moments in the life of the church and in the life of the believer. Many people can not see beyond the squirming baby and the wide eyed young parents to experience the mystery that unfolds each time we celebrate a baptism. We can know all there is to know about baptism and still never fully understand what happens. We can argue the merits of infant baptism versus believer's baptism and never truly get what God is revealing to us. Jesus knew that he needed to submit to the same baptism John was offering to others. This was an essential part of the incarnation, to experience everything we experience. He knew, as the others did not, that from this time forward, baptism would be different.

The story we hear this morning of Jesus' baptism reveals more than the moment and manner in which Jesus began his public ministry. It is only the third chapter of Luke's gospel and already Jesus is a grown man. He has studied in the temple and lived a life of faith. Now he approaches his good friend and cousin, John seeking to be baptized. John has already baptized many others before Jesus. John has been preparing the world for this moment, for the One who would come to redeem the world. John offered a baptism with water for the forgiveness of sins, but he knew that someone was coming who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John knew that person was Jesus.

Even though John could anticipate this moment, he seems surprised to receive this request from Jesus. He does not feel worthy of this honor even though he has been preparing for this moment all his life. Jesus assures him that he is worthy, that this is God's will. Jesus knows John is the one God has chosen to perform this ritual of

cleansing, healing and initiation. From this moment forward everything will change, not only for John, but for everyone that comes in contact with Jesus. In this moment Jesus steps out from the shadows into the light. There is no going back. There is no way to renounce his baptism. Jesus is putting it all on the line. He knows what this will start and he knows eventually where it will end. Jesus is fearless. John finds his courage to do as God has commanded.

The sacrament of baptism has changed drastically from what the early church would have experienced. In the early church baptism was an experience of all the senses. Days of fasting prepared them for their baptism. Several times before and during the baptismal ceremony, the baptismal candidates were anointed with oil. In what was called the “*ephphata* ceremony”, a mixture of dirt and spittle was put upon their ears and nose to symbolize the opening of ears that Mark writes about in his gospel. And when the actual baptism happened, a lot of water was used so that the baptismal candidates could be fully immersed. Baptism back then could be truly felt, truly seen, truly heard. It could be experienced with most of the senses.

We have domesticated baptism to the point that one might wonder if it has lost all its power. We bring our children, sprinkle them with a bit of water and trust the Holy Spirit to do its work. Then we sit back and hope for the best. We try share the stories of the faith and model a life of prayer. We resist the temptation to skip church when other invitations seem more enticing. We give our children the Bible but secretly hope they won’t take it too seriously because we don’t feel comfortable answering their deepest faith questions. We leave that up to the brave men and women who agree to be their Sunday school teachers or to the ministers who dedicate their lives to forming others in the faith.

On this second Sunday of the New Year we hear again the story of Jesus’ baptism. It is one of the few stories that every gospel writer records. Therefore, it is a pivotal story of our faith. I have heard that Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer, used to passionately remind people to “Remember your baptism!” Therefore, whenever we hear the story of Jesus’ baptism we are also called to remember our own baptism. If you were baptized as an infant, you will not likely be able to retrieve your own personal memories of that day. You may recall the stories that were told on your behalf, the pictures that were taken or the gifts you received. If you were older you might in fact, have your own memories of that event. When Martin Luther admonished believers to “remember your baptism!,” I think he meant something bigger than retrieving one’s particular memories of one particular day.

In his catechism, Martin Luther wrote, “A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued.” Kate Huey says, “I think Martin Luther wanted us to remember each day that we are, and whose we are, and how beloved we are. Even in an age when we spend so much time talking about ‘self esteem,’ don’t we still long to hear that we are *beloved?*” When we remember our baptism we recommit ourselves to the promises that were made that day on our behalf and that we may have confirmed for ourselves at the time of our confirmation. We remember that we are not

alone, that we are put on this planet to be in partnership with other faithful people and with God. We remember that our life has a purpose and that with God at the center of our life all things are possible. We remember that we are followers of Jesus Christ, we are to live as he lived; unafraid, undeterred, and unashamed.

Kate Huey goes on to say, “Today, in churches around the world, people are still being baptized, still being washed in the living waters, still thirsting for God's grace and a word of forgiveness and life, still waiting to be included, to find their place in the story of healing and salvation, still longing for the chance to start their life over. The voice from heaven says, ‘You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ These words may come from heaven but they do not come out of the blue: they echo God's words from Isaiah long before: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine...you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you’ (43:1b, 4a). God remembers us, Isaiah says; in fact, God reassures us, ‘I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands’ (49:16).” What blessed assurance. You, me, all of us are God’s beloved. No matter what has happened or what is happening in our lives we are beloved. We are special. We are cherished.

One of my favorite authors, Henri Nouwen, wrote a book entitled, *Life of the Beloved*. In 1991 he preached a sermon about the baptism of Jesus. In this sermon he focused on God’s declaration of belovedness. He invites us to enter into that experience with Jesus saying, “Jesus heard that voice. He heard that voice when He came out of the Jordan River. I want you to hear that voice, too. It is a very important voice that says, ‘You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter. I love you with an everlasting love. I have molded you together in the depths of the earth. I have knitted you in your mother's womb. I've written your name in the palm of my hand and I hold you safe in the shade of my embrace. I hold you. You belong to Me and I belong to you. You are safe where I am. Don't be afraid. Trust that you are the beloved. That is who you truly are...I want you to hear that voice,” he says, “it is not a very loud voice because it is an intimate voice. It comes from a very deep place. It is soft and gentle. I want you to gradually hear that voice. We both have to hear that voice and to claim for ourselves that that voice speaks the truth, our truth. It tells us who we are. That is where the spiritual life starts -- by claiming the voice that calls us the beloved.”

It makes all the difference when you know yourself to be beloved and trust that all others are beloved by God as well. I believe that is what we should remember of our baptism, not how wet we got, or what articles of clothing we wore, not what gifts we received or how awesome the party was. We should rejoice in the knowledge that we are God’s beloved, no matter what. We don’t have to pretend we are always strong or courageous when we are really scared and vulnerable. We need only be ourselves, the wild, wonderful selves that God created us to be. There will be days when we are strong and smart and invincible. There will be days when we are lost, alone and afraid. However, we are never truly lost or alone when we remember that through the waters of baptism we have been redeemed and claimed and named as God’s beloved ones. This is a victory

day. This is a day to remember and to give thanks and to celebrate the amazing life and ministry that God has in store for us. Remember your baptism and be thankful. Amen

Sources:

Henri Nouwen, "The Life of the Beloved," sermon preached on May 17, 1991.

Kate Huey. ["Affirmed by Love,"](#) reflection by Kate Huey, Baptism of Christ, 2010, SAMUEL at ucc.org.