

Remember Your Baptism and Be Thankful

Matthew 3:13-17

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time/12th August 2007

The great reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) once said baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that takes our entire lives to fulfill. What did he mean by this? First, it provides a corrective to those who think baptism is something that happens once, experienced once and that's it. It's true that we Protestants believe a person is baptized only once. If you were baptized in the Roman Catholic Church before becoming a Presbyterian we did not ask you to be baptized again. Sometimes people join a church either before or right after they've had a baby in order to have a place for their child to be baptized, thinking now that we had him "done" we don't have worry about going back to church. There's something about this approach that believes baptism is one specific act that occurs, once it's done "you're in, home free," when the time comes you go straight to heaven with no detours. This kind of thinking prevents one from understanding what Luther meant. Baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that takes an entire life to fulfill.

Here's a better illustration. Years ago, at my previous church, I was asked to do a funeral for a person I didn't know. The local funeral home director was asked to find a Protestant clergy to conduct the service. When the service was over, in the funeral home, family and friends were dismissed in order to prepare the casket for burial. I was leaving the room when the nephew of the deceased came up to me as they were about to close the casket and said a bit nervous, "I don't think my uncle was baptized. Could you baptize him now?" Well, that was a first! It caught me off-guard. In one part of my brain I was trying to mentally engage with all the assumptions the nephew was making about the meaning of baptism, another part of my brain was trying to assess my pastoral obligations, and other part of my brain was figuring out the theological response that I was slowly formulating in my head, which emerged from my mouth. I basically said to him it's not going to mean a lot for your uncle now. This scenario was actually used as a Presbyterian polity exam question at Drew University's Theological School. Baptism is a once-in- a-lifetime experience that takes our entire lives to fulfill.

What's promised and affirmed in baptism, either *for* us by our parents and/or *by* us as adults, takes a lifetime to fathom and to live out. It occurs once in a ritual that is in some ways older than the church. Ritual washing is rooted in Judaism. But the meaning, the implication of this simple yet profound act takes a very long time for us to fathom. We don't understand it or embrace it overnight, or even after getting all the

way through church school to confirmation. Generally, we don't really understand what it means until we're well through adolescence and into adulthood when our faith matures. That's why we don't approach it casually, but with respect, mystery, and even awe.

Why does it take so much time to fulfill, to live into what is affirmed and promised in this rite? *Because, I think, baptism is ultimately about identity: who we are and whose we are.* John the Baptist is calling people to a baptism of repentance, washing away of all that separates one from God. Jesus allows himself to undergo the same process, to identify with all those who are separated from God, but when Jesus comes out of the water something new is offered. The Spirit of God descends upon him like a dove alighting on him and then he hears this voice from heaven: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased." What emerges from baptism is Jesus' true identity – we discover who he is, he sees his connection with his Father, he knows who he is and we know too. Here we see the Beloved of God in our midst.

This means those who follow this Jesus are baptized *into him, into his life.* This means that somehow, some way we share this same identity with Christ or, better said, *when we are in Christ we discover who we really are.* In fact, at the risk of sounding blasphemous, I believe there is room in our theology for us to hear God saying to *us* in our baptismal identity, "You are my son. You are my daughter, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

What's declared in baptism is our true identity: Child of God. Beloved. Well-pleasing to God. That's who we are, that's what Jesus came to show. The Christian life consists of living into this identity, living into this reality, this life, this *identification*, getting comfortable with these names

Is this how you see yourself, really? When you look in the mirror, is this how you feel about yourself? Child of God. Beloved of God. Well-pleasing to God? See how far we have to go? And why it takes a lifetime to fulfill what's claimed for us in the waters of baptism? It's not a matter of earning our way there; this isn't how righteousness works, trying to live up to these names. It's a matter of becoming who you are – *already*. Paul understands the Christian life this way when he writes to his people. Become who you are. This is how God sees us in Christ. Do we see ourselves in the same way? If not, then why not? Coming to this proper self-image doesn't happen in a moment, but throughout our lives, providing we are flowing in the right direction.

There's something to be said for the fact that Jesus was baptized in a river, in flowing water. It wasn't a lake or a pool or a stagnant water, but in flowing water. Baptism is a way of saying that our lives are being caught up in the current of God's grace to take us where we need to go. Being baptized means jumping into the flow of God's grace and discovering who we are in the eyes of God. Presbyterians generally don't refer to baptism as a rite; we talk of it as a sacrament, a visible sign of an invisible grace, as Augustine (354-430) said. But it is a religious ritual. Religious rituals can easily be done by rote becoming thoughtless habits. But when they're approached correctly, they become an entrée in something truly profound. The word *ritual* comes from the Latin "ritus" which means "to flow"; the word "river" has the same root. A ritual affirms that we are participants in a divine drama, each with significant parts in a cosmic play of redemption. Through ritual "we enter into the flow of the universe and something ancient is released in us."¹

To be baptized in Christ means we have jumped into the flow of God's grace. We are moving, flowing toward our identity, growing deeper into our knowledge of God and Christ. We are slowly discovering who we are and whose we are. We are gradually discovering that we do not belong to ourselves but belong to God. We are steadily living into and from an image of ourselves given to us by Christ: Child of God. Beloved of God. Well-pleasing to God. And every time we witness a baptism, we are reminded that we're not there yet.

No one becomes a person by oneself. We don't do this on our own. We need a community to support us in the process, and it doesn't happen overnight, but over time. The same is true when it comes to our identity in Christ. We all need people to remind us, sometimes daily, who we are and whose we are – because it is so easy for us to forget or doubt these claims. Who is that person for you? Who helps you to remember? We all need people who can say to us, "Remember your baptism," particularly when times are tough, or we develop temporary amnesia, or we lose our way, or when we're flowing against God's current, or when we're bombarded with so many other competing messages. "Remember who you are." We need people in our lives that are going to help us keep up with the flow, keep us moving forward, growing into who we are.

This is the work of the church, isn't it? In many ways, this is what the congregation stands to affirm, it's what we say we're going to do for every person baptized: *We will remind you who you are and whose you are.* That's why we need the

¹ Cited in David Tacey, *How to Read Jung* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co), 91. Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin, "Running water is a holy thing." A Cornwall (England) Proverb

community to achieve this. We can't do this alone. It's also why it's very difficult being Christian on one's own, apart from the community.

For the church, when it's really being the church, allows us to hear what we all need to hear: you are a child of God, you are beloved of God, and you are well-pleasing in God's sight. In a few moments, Clara Beatrice Nelsen will be baptized – as you hear the water poured into the font, think of the flowing water of God's grace. Remember your baptism, that you are baptized. Affirm for yourself, again or maybe, really for the first time, what we will claim for Clara Beatrice.

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