

## *Walking Into the Water*

### Matthew 3:13-17

A drunk guy stumbled upon a baptismal service one Sunday afternoon down by the river. It was down South, back in the day, and this guy walked right down into the water and stood next to the preacher. The minister saw the guy and said to him, "Mister, are you ready to find Jesus?" The drunk man answered, "Yes, I am, preacher." The minister dunked the fellow under the water and pulled him right back up.

"Have you found Jesus?" the preacher asked. "No, I haven't!" said the drunk guy. The preacher then dunked him under the water for a bit longer, brought him up and said, "Now, brother, have you found Jesus?" The drunk answered, "No, I haven't, preacher." The preacher dunked the man for the third time and held him under the water for even a longer period, brought him out of the water and said in a somewhat harsh tone, "Friend, have you still not found Jesus, yet?" The drunk guy wiped his eyes, gasping for breath and said to the preacher, "Naw, preacher, are you sure this is where he fell in?"  
Are you glad that we baptize people just by sprinkling water on the head?

The first Sunday after Epiphany is marked on the church calendar for the Baptism of Jesus Christ. Many Christian churches around the world celebrate today by reading and reflecting on the story of Jesus' baptism. And, often, the celebrations include baptizing new believers and inviting baptized members to renew their baptismal vows.

We do not have a scheduled baptism today, but will have a reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant for baptized persons. If you have not been baptized yet, today is a great opportunity for you. Just come forward at the invitation during the renewal of baptismal vows.

The United Methodist Church has two sacraments that were instituted by Jesus: Communion and Baptism. Jesus asked his disciples to celebrate communion in his memory and to practice baptism in his name. However, baptism was not something that he newly started. It had already existed before his time. Non-Jews were baptized when they converted to Judaism in order to signify their cleansing because they were considered dirty, born a sinner.

Then, John the Baptist began to baptize the Israelites as well, to signify their repentance. He preached that not only the Gentiles but also the Jews, God's chosen people, were sinners. So, they too needed to repent and be baptized. Many people came to hear John's preaching and to be baptized by him — including as we read today, Jesus.

Jesus' baptism is an event no one seems to question when it comes to its authenticity. The story made it into all 4 gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But, for first century Christians, it was rather a controversial story. Biblical scholars believe that it is highly likely the story of Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist was an embarrassment to the early church. Since John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, the story of Jesus being baptized by John created a major question in the minds of many believers. They wondered, if Jesus was truly without sin, why did he have to be baptized? Matthew's version of Jesus' baptism story seems to try to answer this question.

One day, John saw Jesus among the people who came out to be baptized in the Jordan River. Jesus wanted to be baptized, too. But John objected and said to Jesus, “Do you come to me? I am the one who needs to be baptized by you!” Yet, Jesus insisted and said, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” So, John baptized Jesus.

Thus, Matthew makes it clear that Jesus was baptized not because he was a sinner. Jesus’ baptism was for a larger purpose — “to fulfill all righteousness.” What does it mean to fulfill all righteousness?

Today, being righteous means to be right, especially in a moral way. But, in Jesus’ time, the word had a deeper meaning than it does today. The Hebrew word for righteous (*tsedeq* or *tsadiq*) involved how people related to each other. To be righteous was to be in a right relationship with another. It meant fulfilling one’s obligations in the relationships a person had. Being righteous was doing what God required, responding to the will of God. So, one would be considered to be righteous when he or she had kept the instructions of Torah in his or her relationships with God and with other people. Both Jesus and John the Baptist were righteous because they responded to the revealed will of God with humility.

For John, baptizing Jesus meant accepting the change of his status. It meant losing his disciples to Jesus, after all. From the moment he agreed to baptize Jesus, he knew that Jesus would become greater and he would become less. And it soon became a reality, which is recorded in the Gospel of John (John 3:26-30).

For Jesus, showing up at the Jordan to be baptized by John meant associating with sinners. Walking into the water meant becoming one of the sinners. Being baptized by John the Baptist meant humbling himself to his authority. To respond to God’s will, to bring God’s salvation to all of God’s people, Jesus humbled himself and was baptized in the midst of the sinners he had come to save.

As Jesus did at his baptism, when we repent of our sins, we do not simply confess our own personal sins but the sins of all humankind. Borrowing Barbara Taylor’s words, our sins are “all the things we as a people have done and failed to do, all the ways we have fled from the love of God because we are afraid to be seen, known and changed. And, when we celebrate the gift of new life, we do not do it simply for ourselves. We say our alleluias on behalf of all those who have discovered hope in the midst of despair, light in the midst of darkness, life in the midst of death. Nothing we do here [in our faith community] is a private matter between us and God. Like Jesus in the river, this is something we do in union - in communion - with all humankind.” (*Home By Another Way*, p.35)

Jesus’ baptism probably did not appear to be any different from the other baptisms that happened on the Jordan River. Just like everyone else, Jesus went in and came out of the water. But then, something totally unexpected happened.

Heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus in the form of a dove and alighting on him. Then, there was a voice, saying, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” Luke says the voice talked to Jesus directly, “You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). At this point, Jesus had not begun his ministry. He was merely the son of Mary and Joseph. So, the reason why God was pleased with Jesus was not because of anything he had done. No, it was simply because he was God’s beloved. I am sure these words of affirmation gave him enough strength to resist temptations, to resist giving in to the lure of power and fame in the wilderness, and to endure the trials of his ministry till the end.

When we are baptized, it is not just the baptism of repentance. It is also the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In the waters of baptism, we too are marked and claimed as God's child, as God's son or daughter, as God's beloved.

For the last 2000 years since Jesus' baptism, the church has professed this amazing truth every time a new believer is received through baptism. When water is sprinkled on the forehead of the baptized, we join in the chorus of voices that have sung about God's love throughout the generations: "You are my child, my beloved. You are mine. I am well pleased with you."

However, baptism is not just about us accepting God's love for us but also about us responding to God's love. Through our baptismal vows, we are called to reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of our sins; to accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in all forms; to confess Jesus Christ as our Savior; to serve as Christ's representatives in the world; to love others, to tell others in word and deed that they too are God's beloved.

Despite all our intentions and desires to be faithful to these vows we have made, we fail, individually and corporately, and often miserably. We see such failure in the denominational split we are now anticipating with mixed feelings.

But, here is the good news for us: Our merciful God knows and understands our weaknesses and offers us another chance to start over again. As someone wrote in the Christian Century magazine a few years ago (12/09/2015), "with each new year, God extends to us a fresh opportunity to become the people God intends us to be, to try again to be guided by love and mercy, to crave justice, be present with others, and to live fully awake to God's presence."

Jesus walked into the water to become one of us, to be one with us in the muddy waters of our lives. And, he came out of the water with the assurance of God's beloved. Let us join him. Let us boldly walk into the water of faith, so that we too might become one with God and one with the world through Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.