

Take me to the Water
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Matthew 3.13-17
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We seem to be in a particular fast forward situation with our readings, two weeks ago we were talking about the birth of Jesus, last week it was the Magi following a star to find the new born baby and this week we find an older Jesus preparing to be baptized in the Jordan river by John, the baptizer as Jesus is preparing to begin his ministry.

One might wonder what Jesus was up to in those missing years. Where was Jesus during those formative years of his life: adolescence, teenage, young adult to now manhood? The answer to that question is probably unknown. However, as curious readers, we might wonder if Jesus had a normal childhood. Was he athletic? Was he bullied in school? Were there family traumas? Was there a feeling of not fitting in; was there a first crush? What was it like for him to go fishing for the very first time?

Since that information is missing we can only ponder what Jesus was doing from birth to the age of 12. At age 12 Luke presents a left behind Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem sitting among the teachers and asking them questions (and answering a few). And we move from age 12 to 30, where Matthew gives us Jesus preparing to be baptized. There is a lot of missing information about the developmental life of Jesus, other than he certainly studied and quoted scriptures.

The baptism of Jesus has been troubling to some communities, Christian as well as non-Christian. It stems from the notion that if Jesus was without sin, why then was he in need of being baptized by John? Matthew is the only gospel in which John protests Jesus' request for baptism. This might be an indication that Perhaps Matthew finds the story troubling too, and therefore tries to make it easier to hear by showing John's discomfort and having Jesus give a reason that won't disturb our high christologies. So Jesus tells John to go ahead with the baptism so that he could completely identify with those that he came to set free.

When Jesus was baptized by John, the presence and knowledge of God came upon Jesus and the presence left Jesus with the affirmation of belonging to and loved by God. I believe that this was Jesus' moment of being both fully human and having a totally embodied Spiritual experience.

Many think that this is the moment that Baptism became a Sacrament. However, the act of baptism has its roots well into the Hebrew Bible, from the laws of ceremonial washing to purification after child birth, to the acceptance of a leper back into the community. There was a washing ritual for just about everything conceivable.

Baptism, however, represents for some a change in life from past mistakes to new beginnings. Baptism signifies a new spiritual life where all old things are washed away and behold all things are new.

Reverend Dr. Tom Bohachae writes in the *Queer Bible Commentary* that “the newness baptism represents can be encountered by everyone, Christian or nor Christian, but because baptism is a term with a uniquely Christian symbolism, one should not presume to claim its significance for those on other paths to the divine.”

Chester Gills says in a *New Paradigm for Theology* that “one of the dangers of Christian theology and missiology is its claim to the Truth, what some have rightly labeled Christian imperialism” and that can be seen in antiquity, when baptism was used from a place of privilege whereby an invading country would require all its’ subjects to be baptized and required to pledge allegiance to a new form of government or faith.

In a glimpse of early American history, we learn that as early as “1639, it was stated and enforced that baptism as a Christian did not make a slave a free person.” Over the years, we have had to clean up and redefine what baptism really is all about.

However, we are reminded that Baptism is an outward and visible sign of the grace of God. Through baptism a person is joined with the universal church, the body of Christ. In baptism, God works in us the power of forgiveness, the renewal of the spirit, and the knowledge of the call to be God's people always.

In reviewing our baptism story today, we can ask, what might baptism mean to our community? In our context, baptism may symbolize a coming out process, whereby individuals come to terms with who they are and seek to rid themselves of the negative images that threaten us in our formative years of life. Baptism may symbolize that yearning to fit in when all others have cast us out. Baptism may symbolize that opportunity to be embraced by a community that says come just as you are.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that through our baptism we are made one by the one God who is over all and lives in all and works through us all. Baptism isn't just an initiation into a particular community; it isn't just a naming ceremony or just a symbol of spiritual purity. It isn't even just a symbol of new beginnings. Some believe that it somehow mediates divine grace, and even if it somehow does, that still isn't all that it is. Baptism is our reminder that, like Jesus, we belong to God and we are loved by God.

All of us, without exception...no matter who we are, what we are, or what we believe in this moment, baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality...and that reality is the love of God. It anoints us. It fills us. It blesses us. It claims us. It empowers us. It strengthens us. It gives us hope.

Baptism is our reminder that we are the children of God and as the children of God, we not only have important work to do, we have the power and the grace to do it. We are called to build the grace-filled community of God that does not require us to major in minors ... we are called to that task at our baptism, and when we answer that call we are living in the power of our baptism.

Was Jesus sinless? Many assume so. But more important than being without sin, we know that he wasn't without the grace, the love, the power, the affirmation of baptism. His baptism helps us to renew confidence in our own, as we allow ourselves to hear this morning, as Jesus heard at his baptism, "We are God's children in whom God is well pleased." Amen.