

REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM

Luke 3:15-22

Today is The Baptism of the Lord Sunday. It's the one day of the year we remember Jesus was baptized and we are reminded of our own baptisms. While we celebrate the sacrament of communion once per month or more, we tend to forget the sacrament of our baptism. Jesus told us to continue to celebrate his Last Supper and said it foreshadowed his coming death on the cross. And we do. Jesus also told us to baptize people in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we do. But, a congregation can go a while between baptisms and in the process forget baptism's significance. So the ecumenical church has set aside a Sunday to remember Jesus' and our baptism.

Matthew gives us more information about Jesus' baptism than either Mark or Luke. In his gospel we learn of Jesus' birth, the visit of the Wise Men, Joseph and Mary's escape to Egypt, Herod's massacre of the infants in Bethlehem, and Joseph and Mary's return to Nazareth with the child. Then, the next thing we know, Jesus is an adult. John the Baptist begins his ministry of preparation for the Messiah to come and Jesus is baptized by John.

Jesus went into the wilderness with the crowds to hear John preach. John made it a practice to call people to repent of their sins and receive a physical and spiritual cleansing by being baptized in the Jordan River. When Jesus stepped forward with the others in the crowd, John put up his hands and demurred, *"I should be baptized by you, not vice versa."*

“No, no, this is how it should be,” Jesus assured John. “Do it. God’s work putting things right is coming together now in this baptism.”

So, John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River and the moment Jesus came out of the water, the skies opened. Jesus saw God’s Spirit, which looked like a dove, descending and landing on him. Along with the Spirit came a voice: *“This is my Son, my Beloved. I delight in him.”*

Sometimes people ask why Jesus submitted himself to baptism. If it was a baptism of repentance of sin in response to John’s preaching, why should Jesus do it? An Anglican bishop answers that like this:

It tells us something about the whole gospel story that is going to unfold before our surprised gaze. Jesus is coming to fulfill God’s plan, the promise which God made ages ago and has never forgotten...But if God is to do this, this is how he must do it: by humbly identifying himself with God’s people, taking their place, sharing their penitence, living their life, and ultimately dying their death. (1)

Jesus’ baptism signifies his identification with us, with sinful and often broken humanity. It’s how he takes on the sins of the world. His baptism announces that Jesus is the Son of God. It’s been said that the baptism of Jesus is one of the most theologically profound events in the gospel narratives. When the Father spoke from heaven, saying, *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased,”* the divine sonship of Jesus was announced in a vivid and dramatic way. When the Spirit descended upon Jesus, the event gave us a picture of the Trinity, with the Father’s gift of the Spirit to the Son. (2)

Something very significant occurred when Jesus was baptized. Something very significant occurred when we were baptized as well. Jesus' baptism marked him as the beloved Son of God who would accomplish God's plan of redemption. Our baptisms, according to our PCUSA liturgy, marked us "as Christ's own forever." Our baptisms give us an identity, a mission, and a future.

Baptism bonds us to Jesus. In union with him, the Son of God, we become children of God. Baptism sets us apart. It identifies us as Christian. It gives us a story by which to live – a story of God's creation, of creation's fall, of God's redemption, and of creation's renewal. The story enables us to make sense of the world we live in and to identify our place in it. Baptism tells us that we, like Jesus, are children of God, beloved by God.

It's similar to the time Donn Moomaw went to the inauguration of President Ronald Reagan. Moomaw was Reagan's pastor at Bel Air Presbyterian Church in southern California and Reagan invited him to participate in the ceremony. The White House supplied Moomaw's plane ticket, hotel room, limousine, service, and meals. Every step of the way he was marked as "Guest of the President." Every step of the trip, that demarcation as the president's guest gave Moomaw an identity and purpose.

Our baptisms mark us as God's special guests for as long as our trip on earth lasts and beyond. We belong to God and God loves us. We carry that mark through the finish.

Baptism tells us that we, like Jesus, have a mission. Like Jesus, baptism calls us to receive God's love and manifest God's love, while we work against all that opposes

God's love. Jesus described our mission as making disciples by loving one another as God loves us. Because of our baptism, we can join with Paul in saying:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal.2:19b-200)

Baptism unites us to Christ. This union empowers us to love others as he loves them. Our mission is to give ourselves for them as Christ gave himself for us.

A story about Chaim Potok illustrates our baptismal mission. Eugene Peterson tells the story of Potok's decision to become a writer:

He wanted be a writer from an early age, but when he went to college, his mother took him aside and said, "Chaim, I know you want to be a writer, but I have a better idea. Why don't you be a brain surgeon? You'll keep a lot of people from dying and you'll make a lot of money." Chaim replied, "No mama, I want to be a writer," He returned home for vacation. His mother pulled him aside and said, "Chaim, I know you want to be a writer, but listen to your mother. Be a brain surgeon. They keep a lot of people from dying and they make a lot of money." Chaim replied, "I want to be a writer."

This conversation went on throughout his college years until, at the end, his mother in desperation said, "Chaim, you're wasting your time. Be a brain surgeon. They save a lot people from dying, and you'll make a lot of money." Finally, he exploded, "Mama, I don't want to keep a lot of people from dying; I want to show them how to live! I want to be a writer." (3)

Jesus shows us how to live and our baptism enlists us in emulating him. We too show people how to live by showing them how to love. (Curiously, when I type the word live I often miss the i and hit an o instead and spell love when I am trying to type live. Perhaps it is because for Christians the word live is interchangeable with love.) We show people how to love by giving ourselves for others as Jesus gave himself for us. In his baptism, Jesus assumed our burden; because of our baptism it is our mission to do the same for others.

Baptism tells us that we, like Jesus, have a future. Paul wrote to the Romans and instructed:

Don't you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3-4)

Our baptisms promise life eternal in union with Jesus Christ. This promise offers a present existential encouragement in times of stress. The great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, was given to times of depression. In 1525 he married Katherine van Bora and developed a deep affection for her. Though Luther could be a difficult man, whenever he would “get the blues,” Katherine would wait for the right moment and say, “Remember, Martin, you have been baptized.” She knew that her words held the promise of eternity with Jesus Christ. They’d give Martin the strength to press on. They can do the same for us.

Our Presbyterian Study Catechism asks: What does it mean to be baptized?

It answers:

My baptism means that I am joined to Christ forever. I am baptized into his death and resurrection, along with all who have received him by faith. As I am baptized with water, he baptizes me with his Spirit, washing away all my sins and freeing me from their control. My baptism is a sign that one day I will rise with Christ in glory and may walk with him even now in newness of life. (Question 72)

There's a lot of good natured banter regarding baptism between Protestants about our differing ways of celebrating the sacrament of baptism, about how we baptize people. Baptists, for example immerse the baptized, while we Presbyterians sprinkle them. One time a Presbyterian and Baptist pastor were discussing the how of baptism. The Presbyterian asked the Baptist if he considered a person baptized who only got in the water up to his waist. "No," the Baptist answered. "How about getting into the water up to his neck?" asked the Presbyterian. Again the Baptist said, "No." "Well," the Presbyterian pressed, "Suppose you immersed him up to his eyebrows. Would he be baptized then?" Becoming annoyed, the Baptist answered "No" yet again. "Well, then, there you have it," the Presbyterian declared. "It's only the bit water on the top of the head that counts."

We've gone from the sublime to the ridiculous. I don't want to say that how people are baptized is simply a matter of taste. Both Presbyterians and Baptists have significant theological reasons for how each group baptizes. But, the point is this: The why of baptism is more important than the how. Why does any Christian body baptize people? We

do it in response to Jesus commanding us to “*go into all the world, baptizing.*” For when we do so, we unite them to Jesus Christ forever; we give them a mission for life; and we give them a promise of eternal life.

Once a year the church remembers Jesus’ baptism. We remember what it meant for him and in turn what it means for us. For Jesus baptism meant identification with sinful humanity and his being revealed as the beloved Son of God. For us baptism means our identity, mission, and future. We do well to listen to Katherine Luther’s counsel to Martin: **Remember your Baptism.**

Sources:

1. Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, Part One, WJK, p. 21-22.
2. *The Worship Sourcebook*, Baker, p.519.
3. Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, cited in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. XVII, No.1, p.51.