

“WHY THE BAPTISM?”

Preached by Rev. Dr. Jerry M. Jordan

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This morning's Order of Service had already been printed when I was asked to preach in place of Ryan, so his sermon title “Christian Identity??” isn't mine. However, I do want to use the same scripture reading, which is the lectionary selection for today: Matthew 3:13-17. I'm going to have Kaya, our liturgist, read it for us. If you want to follow along, you'll find it on page 3 in your Pew Bible:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

This is what I want to talk about this morning. The title of my sermon, if that matters to you, is “Why the Baptism?”

Looking back, to the best of my memory (a memory which is getting holier and holier, meaning not more **holy** but more like Swiss cheese), I don't recall ever preaching on this passage from Matthew. Why? Well, this event in Jesus' life has always troubled me. In my early theological training I was taught that baptism was for the forgiveness of sins. That's what it says in Mark's Gospel (1:4): “*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*” Peter said to the new converts at Pentecost, recorded in Acts (2:38): “*Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven . . .*” Paul said much the same to the Christians in Rome, in a letter he wrote to them (6:1): “*Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?*” And he answered his own question (vs. 2), “*By no means!*”, thus reminding them of the significance of their baptism. Even in our **Book of Worship**, it reads, “Do you renounce the powers of evil and desire the freedom

of new life in Christ?” Evil? That really sounds sinful! Hmmm, was this what John said to Jesus when he baptized him in the river Jordan? How did Jesus understand his own baptism? Here’s the problematic question I can’t help but ask: Did Jesus want to be baptized because he was sinful?

Now, this could get us into a lengthy sermon (Benjamin, how much time do I have?). Maybe this topic would be better yet discussed in the Adult Forum or a Bible class. Nevertheless, the question is before us: Was Jesus sinless? There is a verse in the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews (4:15), which says so: *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”* Those last three words trouble me: “yet without sin.” Really?

If Jesus was sinless, why the baptism? What we need is a Mike Wallace of “60 Minutes” to go back to that first century and ask Jesus point blank, “Have you ever sinned?” I know that sounds sacrilegious. How dare one question Jesus like this! The early Christians didn’t, nor has the historic Church since. It has just become an article of faith that Jesus was sinless. Though, I wonder what Jesus would say about this. Does our kind of sin not apply to Jesus? Case closed?

Ah, wasn’t Jesus like us, fully human? He was “tested as we are,” as we just noted in scripture. I like to think he reacted at times in ways we do, from saying a curse word when he hit his finger with a hammer (surely this happened while working with his father in the carpentry shop) to enjoying a party with wine and dancing. Some rigid Christians would call such things “sins.” There are those who said this of him. But SIN is really much larger in scope. It’s self-centeredness that puts us first and God second, or misdeeds (like hate and greed and dishonesty and abuse and just plain meanness) which separates us from God. But I believe that in Jesus there was a holiness that was so near to God that our kind of sins just don’t apply. Or, theologically speaking (and as a way of explaining Jesus’ sinlessness) he so God-centered and such a compassionate lover of others (even when those he encountered were sinful) that he lived a life without SIN. God was the center of his reality! All of which means that he was never ever separated from God. Case closed!

Ok, then why did Jesus ask to be baptized? Just this past week I heard a radio preacher, whose name and church affiliation I didn’t catch, preaching on this very question (even before I knew that I too would be preaching on it). In essence, he said Jesus was baptized in order to personally take on the sins of others, just as he did on the Cross. Since I didn’t agree with this, I switched stations. Another reason why Jesus chose to be baptized is told in a story in **The Gospel According to the Hebrews**, one of those so-called “gospels” that didn’t make it into our current Bible. It suggests Jesus did it because his mother wanted him to do it, and in so doing he fulfilled the 5th Commandment. But, as he went forth to do as she requested, he said, “What

sin have I committed, that I should go and be baptized by him?” A third way of interpreting this, which I affirm, is that Jesus went to John for baptism because he wanted to be a part of John’s ministry in bringing Israel back into the Kingdom of God. John was preaching God’s Kingdom, and in so doing reaching out to both Jews and non-Jews alike, all who had sinned against God, trying to bring them to repentance and thus a right relationship with God. But when Jesus came to him, John recognized something different about him, that in fact Jesus as the Messiah. So he said to Jesus, “*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*” But Jesus replied, “*Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.*”

As I grappled with this text, two thoughts came to mind. The first has to do with the fact that Jesus was a Jew. He knew Israel’s story, that God’s people had sinned many times, and he wanted to do something about that. It was to be his mission in life to bring God’s people back into a right relationship with their Creator. But to do this he needed to identify with them. Baptism was that purifying way, that way of saying “YES!” to God. And, second, it was Jesus’ way of personally pledging obedience to God, or as it says in our passage, “*to fulfill all righteousness*”, which means *doing the will of God*. And that is what Jesus committed himself to do when he came up out of the river Jordan, yes, continuing on even to the hill of Calvary. What was God’s will for him? To help ALL to know they are divinely loved, and to live ever more faithfully *for* and *with* God.

But there is more to glean from this text in Matthew. It has to do with our baptism. Remember, each of us has been baptized because Jesus was baptized. This now is a sacrament of the Church, in which we participate together. As it says in our **Book of Worship**, “[Baptism] is ‘a sign and seal of our common discipleship. Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the church of every time and place.’” As Jesus was baptized in the Jordan with many witnesses to this event, so we are to give witness to the faith as we share in the joy of baptizing the faith-filled into Church. We do this together in faith. Because of this, I seldom performed private baptisms, though there are a few exceptions to this rule. And when “in private,” I always have at least a witness from the church standing in for the larger Church. While it is a personal faith journey we travel through life when once baptized, we’re not to go it alone. This is what I said just a few weeks ago when I had the privilege to baptize my grandson Jordan (I like that as a first name) in this sanctuary. After I baptized him, I softly said to him (you may not have heard it), “Bless you my child, for together we will go forth on the journey of faith.”

When I participate in a baptism, whether officially or in the pew, I’m praying that each of us will reflect on the meaning of our own baptism. Actually, I don’t remember my own, for I was baptized as an infant in a little Methodist Church in Erick, Oklahoma; 1937. But my parents and the Church (ministers, Sunday School teachers, and faith-filled members) over the years

helped me to know what they did on my behalf. And at the appropriate time in my life, when I came of age in this faith, realizing what faith in God and Jesus meant, I **completed** that baptism with my own confession of faith. Since then I've tried to fulfill the righteousness Jesus spoke of, seeking to do God's will. Yes, along life's path I've sinned, I admit it! Or, as I like to say as an ordained minister, there are some rips in this cloth I wear. But I pray, with God's forgiveness and abiding grace and guidance, as I continually seek to affirm the promise in my baptism, that I will hear that voice from Heaven saying as I journey farther and at my life's end, words that Jesus heard as he began and ended his ministry, "I am well pleased." May it be for you, too!

AMEN

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