

“Only Just Begun”

Matthew 3: 13 – 17

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For those of us who grew up in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination, the story of the baptism of Jesus is, in part, our story as well. Disciples historian Duane Cummins wrote, “Somewhere in the hills of western Pennsylvania during the summer of 1812, Alexander Campbell, along with his wife, mother and father, stepped into the waters of Buffalo Creek and was immersed in baptism. The act resulted from careful study and from Campbell’s conclusion that persons baptized in New Testament times were responsible believers and were immersed.” (Cummins, ‘A Handbook for Today’s Disciples’, p. 27) Jesus was immersed. The early followers in the New Testament church were immersed. So we will follow their example!

It *might* be good to park our righteousness. Nowadays not many baptisms happen in a creek or river. We use a nice heated, chemically treated bathtub type structure. So we’re not totally mimicking those early followers. And even if we were to use a creek or river, we still might miss the early church mark. One of the early church fathers, Tertullian, around 200 A.D. described baptism in the 2nd Century church as follows: “When we are going to enter the water, we solemnly profess that we disown the devil, his pomp, and his angels. Hereupon, we are thrice immersed, (that’s 3 times dunked in modern English!) making somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel. Then, when we are taken up, we taste first a mixture of milk and honey. And from that day we refrain from the daily bath for a whole week.” One might say that the early Christians had ‘a smell of sanctity about them’! In addition, those first converts were baptized naked or with only sparse undergarments, putting on white robes when they came up out of the water, a sign that they had put on Christ like a garment. I wonder...if we went back to this early practice in our baptism services, baptizing and THEN putting on a robe, would it attract a crowd or just the opposite?

Yes, the story of Jesus’ baptism influenced the Disciples to embrace baptism by immersion, however now in a warm tube with a robe on *during* and baths allowed *after*. But that is just speaking about the mechanics of the ritual. What does it actually mean to us? What does it mean to you? As a pastor, I can say that that has gotten just as muddied as the banks of the Jordan. It’s complicated, or, at least we’ve made it so.

In the story called "the River," novelist Flannery O'Connor tells of the day that Bevel, a child of alcoholic and abusive parents, is taken to a baptizing by his sitter:

"Have you ever been baptized?" the preacher asked. "What's that?" he murmured. "If I baptize you," the preacher said, "you'll be able to go to the kingdom of Christ. You'll be washed in the river of suffering, son. You'll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?" "Yes," the child said, and thought, "I won't have to go back to the apartment then. I'll go on to the river." "You won't be the same again," the preacher said. "You'll count. . . ." And without more warning he tightened his hold and swung him upside down, and plunged his head into the water. He held him under while he said the words of baptism. Then he jerked him up again and looked sternly

at the gasping child. Bevel's eyes were dark and dilated. "You count now," the preacher said. "You didn't even count before."

Do any of you cringe along with me at the telling of that story? That so many times, the act of baptism has been viewed as a ticket to worthiness? 'You didn't even count before.' Really? All of our kids who came up to hear the children's message just a minute ago, can we in good faith say, "You haven't been baptized, you don't count yet?" Or what about those of you in the pew who for one reason or another have not been baptized? Oh, you don't count in God's eyes! Or to those of different faiths, do they 'count'? When we think of baptism in this way, what do we do with God's grace; God's unconditional love: we put the condition of baptism on it. Diluting and destroying grace.

Another story, this one from evangelical preacher Tony Campolo. You may have heard this story told before, but it's worth the retelling:

Years ago, Tony travelled to Honolulu to a conference. He went to his hotel, fell asleep and woke up at 9AM his time but it was 3AM Honolulu time. Wide awake and hungry, he went to a diner near the hotel to get some coffee and a donut. At 3:30AM a group of provocatively dressed prostitutes walked in the door. They were loud and rude. Tony decided to leave.

But then he heard one of the women say, "Tomorrow is my birthday. I'm going to be 39."

Her friend responded, "So what do you want from me? You want me to get you a present? You want me to buy you a cake or sing 'Happy Birthday'?"

"Aw, why do you have to be so mean? I don't want anything from you. I was just telling you. Why would I expect you to throw me a party? I've never had a cake or party in my life. Why should I have one now?"

When Tony heard that, he had an idea. He sat back down and after the women left, he went up to the cook and asked, "Do they come in here every night about this time." The answer, "Yeah, you can set your clock by it."

"What's the name of that woman who was sitting over there?" "Agnes"

"What would you think about us throwing her a birthday party tomorrow night?" A big grin went across the cook's face. The next night they did just that! Tony came in with a cake and decorations about 2:30AM. The wait staff decorated, other prostitutes who heard about what was going on came. They all hid and when Agnes walked in the door they jumped out, yelled 'Surprise!' and sang Happy Birthday. Agnes burst into tears, was so moved that she had to have help blowing out the candles.

After the candles were blown out, Tony suggested they pray. Everyone agreed. And so Tony prayed for Agnes and the other prostitutes in the diner, affirming that they were all beloved daughters of God, with great value, worth and promise.

Later, when Tony told the cook he was in town with other preachers, the cook got wide eyed, ‘I didn’t know you were a preacher! What kind of church do you belong to?’

Tony paused then in a moment of divine inspiration answered, ‘I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.’ (What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian? By Martin Thielen, p. 84 – 86)

Maybe I’m an idealist but that is what I would like to believe, that when I was baptized, I was being baptized into the church universal, a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.

A church that holds onto baptism not as an act of exclusion but as an act of embracing God’s all inclusive love. Not saying “you didn’t count before” but ‘you have always counted in God’s eyes and now you are accepting and owning and embracing that, that amazing grace that saves a one like even you and even me!’

Oh, yes, there is so much more! In baptism, we speak of the cleansing of our former selves, stepping out into a new self. We speak of burying the old and living into a sense of newness. And as we read the story of Jesus’ baptism, especially as written in Matthew, we have an understanding that he had only just begun, that as he came up out of the waters and the clouds departed, it was in a sense his moment of inauguration into ministry, affirming his call as God’s beloved son.

The story of Jesus’ baptism is told this time every year because it is an epiphany story; it is a story of God’s love made manifest in the world, an ‘ah ha’ moment for Jesus and, as we hear the story, an ‘ah ha’ moment for us as well, that THIS one affirmed by God as God’s beloved was a gift to the world that God so loves...

Oh these baptismal waters, how rich they are! With the act, with the witness of others’ baptisms, with the recalling of the story, we are reminded that we are all God’s beloved, that God’s all inclusive love, that amazing grace, is offered to each and every one of us and that as we reach out to say ‘yes’ to that, to say ‘yes, I am a child of God, loved by God, affirmed by God’ that is not the stopping point. Oh no, we’ve only just begun!

As we step into the new year, as we claim our place as God’s beloved on this baptism Sunday, as we celebrate God’s love made manifest in this season of Epiphany, I end with words by Marianne Williamson that have been spoken from this pulpit more than once. Hear them. Hold onto them. Claim them for yourself. They are:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same..”

Come Holy Spirit, come. May you, like the waters of baptism sweep over us and sculpt us to be agents of God’s reconciliation in the world.