

## What Does Your Baptism Mean to You?

Mark 1:4-11

When I completed the outline for this message, I entitled this sermon “What Do You Remember about Your Baptism?” However, before I submitted the sermon title for the bulletin, it occurred to me that almost everyone who would be hearing the message was baptized as an infant or a young child. You probably remember nothing about your baptism. You know only what your parents or others in the church have told you about it. And perhaps, when we conduct a service of baptism, you imagine the time when the water was dripped onto your head and the minister said, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

I recall my own baptism. I was eight years old. I had recently made a profession of faith in Christ. My rural church at the time did not have a building with a baptistery. Several other children and I were baptized in a church in Clinton. I remember wearing a white robe; I remember stepping into the water; and I remember feeling a little anxious. But I don't remember sensing anything special or attaching any meaning to what was happening.

Consequently, like you I am still trying to attach meaning to my own baptism. We believe, in the words of *The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church*, that baptism is “a sign of profession” and “a sign of regeneration or the new birth.” When we observe the sacrament of baptism, I recall with gratitude that we have a beautiful symbol of God's grace in our lives. I like to think that you and I were baptized, as Jesus was baptized. I'm thankful for the connection that exists there. This morning I want to say why that is important to me.

You and I cannot be so presumptuous as to attempt to psychoanalyze Jesus. We do not know enough about his personality and we do not have enough information in the gospels to understand how Jesus came to be the person he was. How did Jesus come to possess the kind of judgment and

courage he displayed? What was his concept of his relationship with God? How did he feel when he was called Messiah or when he was praised as unique?

No one can say. But you can't help but think about it. Jesus was a human being. The Bible and the church have always been clear on that. If he was human, he grew as human beings grow. He went through the normal stages of physical, mental, and spiritual development. Yet, in the gospels we encounter a man in his late twenties or early thirties who possessed profound insights, remarkable abilities, and amazing self-confidence. How did that happen?

At least part of the answer, I think, can be found in the story of Jesus' baptism. The gospel writers did not say why Jesus came to John to be baptized. They seem to have been a little uneasy in the writing because by the time the accounts were set down the church was saying that Jesus lived a sinless life and John's baptism was a call for repentance from sins. Why Jesus should need such a baptism would be an obvious question. That question is not treated. We are told only that when Jesus was about thirty years of age, he came to be baptized.

Why then? I like to think that Jesus waited until his brothers and sisters reached adulthood. Tradition says that Joseph died when Jesus was young. Probably Jesus helped support the family. If so, when the last sibling had reached his or her upper teens, Jesus was free to leave home. When the time was right, Jesus came to John for baptism.

Most of the time when we read or study this account, we treat it as merely a prelude to Jesus' ministry. We miss something highly important in that approach. When Jesus emerged from the waters of the Jordan River, he heard a voice, "a voice from heaven" according to Mark. In almost every translation, the message Jesus heard was, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Until a few years ago I had never paid too much attention to this line. It is based on statements in Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42. Both passages refer to the Messiah. The words, however Jesus heard them, would help him see his destiny in Messianic terms. Then I discovered that a more accurate rendering of the text would be this: “This is my Son, the Beloved.”

It might seem insignificant to make “Beloved” a noun instead of an adjective. But the difference, I think, is tremendous. It brings a lot of things together. It suggests much about how Jesus felt about himself and his place in the world. If indeed Jesus felt that he heard the voice of God, he heard more than an assignment. He heard affirmation. Just imagine the difference between hearing “You are my beloved child” and “You are the Beloved.” With that assurance and that self-concept, Jesus was ready for his ministry.

When the difficult times came—when the crowds said, “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?”; when the enthusiasm waned and followers drifted away; when the disciples deserted him; when on the cross he felt forsaken—these words remained: “You are the Beloved.” And Jesus was able to endure!

What if each of us could hear that? What if you and I could hear God say to us, “You are the Beloved.” Would that not change the way we see ourselves and the way we see the world? That kind of affirmation would transform our lives.

We hear other voices. We hear voices that say, “Prove yourself and you will be accepted.” We hear voices that say, “Live this way or you are no good.” We hear voices that tell us how we should look, what we should own, and which groups we should associate with. These voices tell us what we must do or be in order to have worthiness and dignity. The message these voices convey becomes deeply embedded in our consciousness.

Why should anyone be surprised that the dominant feeling in our society is self-rejection? How can a person not be tempted to deny or reject who he is? We work at achieving power, popularity, and success in order to make ourselves

acceptable. Then we wait to see whether other people will admit us to the human race. We forget that they are engaged in the same futile effort, and they ignore us. Then self-rejection takes an ugly turn; it expresses itself in jealousy, anger, envy, and sometimes violence.

The voices to which we listen are overpowering. They drive us relentlessly. Sometimes they push us to accomplish genuinely good things. But the heart remains dissatisfied. Even if we seem to be respected and admired, we are not content ourselves. We need to know that we are loved as we are.

Could it be that Jesus' baptism and the sacrament of baptism that the church has developed call us to hear God saying to each of us, "You are my Beloved"? I like to think that. When we talk about what something like baptism means, I come to that point. Both sacraments remind us of a God who has bound himself to us in love and who tries in every way to convince us of that love.

When you hear the message that you are the "beloved" of God and really believe it, your life is changed. Like Jesus, you are set free to be yourself and to live fully. I am very fond of the writings of Wayne Muller. I have been touched time and again by his personal discoveries. He once told about a week-long silent meditation retreat. When he had become used to being alone and being quiet, he sensed a deep sadness. Muller says that he asked every possible question as to the cause of the sadness. The feeling persisted. Then, said, "I began to sense something beneath my sorrow. I could feel a place inside, below all my names, my stories, my injuries, my sadness—a place that lived in my breath. . . . It had a voice, a way of speaking to me about what was true, what was right. And along with the voice came a presence, an indescribable sense of well-being that reminded me that whatever pain or sorrow I would be given, there was something inside strong enough to bear the weight of it."

Jesus heard the voice. And he believed. He believed that he was the beloved of God. Because he did, he was able to pursue his mission with a confidence that others called “authority.” He was able to relate to persons with openness and acceptance. He was able to share his message without fear. And he was able to convey those same qualities to his followers. He called them and us “the light of the world.” He said that we would be able to do his works, that we would actually go beyond what he did.

Amazing, isn't it, what you can do when you feel loved? There is a reason why the gospel writers included this story. There is a reason why the church calendar sets aside a time to consider the baptism of Jesus. Perhaps we are called to remember that we have also come to the waters of baptism. If we do not remember hearing the voice then, maybe we can hear it now. You are the Beloved!

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