

January 12, 2020
Baptism of the Lord

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Baptism: Our Life in Christ

Matthew 3:13-17

The text begins, "then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him."

The NT witness does not drop John from its story of Jesus. He travels a long distance to find John. Why does he need baptism by John?

I believe there was a spiritual friendship. Jesus is drawn to John and John to Jesus. This spiritual friendship is important for the telling of the gospel. It is kept, recorded, and retold. The Apostle Peter in the Acts of the Apostle's text for today says, "... the message that spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism John announced..." John is a necessary part of the story, linked with Jesus in a kind of spiritual friendship.

The work of God in our lives begins with a spiritual friendship. John was important to Jesus. He traveled from Galilee to find him and ask for baptism.

In spiritual friendship there is a harmonization with the other in the deeper parts of our lives. Maybe similar interests, maybe similar personality types. All three chaplains at the hospital where I worked were left-handed, whatever that means. Spiritual friendship is not a sudden connection, but a slow work, where the calling of God in our lives, which we weren't sure what to do with, finds some voice and connection in the calling of another. God gives us a spiritual friend who helps us affirm the call of God in our lives. You may have only one, maybe two spiritual friendship in a lifetime. I have had two. And when I think of them, they make me stronger.

Baptism, our life in Christ begins with a spiritual friendship that brings to life the calling of God in our lives. What happens here. Jesus is baptized by John, God affirms the call of Jesus with the voice from heaven, and in the very next chapter, the ministry of Jesus begins. Baptism, our life in Christ, begins with a spiritual friendship that awakens the call of God in our lives.

I believe very deeply that all persons are called by God. All persons have a unique purpose and work to do that is peculiar to themselves. Karl Barth, the famous 20th-century theologian, identified three major sins—pride, sloth, and the last is to live a lie, that is, to deny that we have any special purpose given to us by God that is specifically ours. All persons are called by God, even the most secular, the most hostile, and most distant. Our calling has emotional

parts, it's cognitive, and deeply instinctual. It surfaces in times of important decisions and is often associated with ways in which you experienced suffering in your life. If you ignore it, you lose something very important. To miss your calling by God is to live a truncated life, a life that is only half of what it was meant to be.

John was Jesus' spiritual friend, and his baptism awakened in him the call of God on his life.

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Now the text says John would have prevented him, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me." Jesus needed his friend's baptism. He needed to be on the receiving end of the grace of God. He needed to surrender to his own call in order to find the grace and capacity to do it. He fell into the water at John's hand and came up anointed with the grace and capacity to begin.

The baptism of an infant touches us. It is a moment of surrender, the child is so completely dependent. The child is baptized into Christ and receives a name, a calling, a purpose and future, at this moment of innocence and dependence. New life in Christ begins at that moment and endures through all of life's experiences until the end.

I have baptized adults only once. It was in a big baptismal pool in a Spanish speaking church in San Francisco. I caught in my arms the one baptized as he fell backwards, surrendering into the water of baptism, into Christ, and emerges with the grace and capacity to live out his/her calling.

John would prevent the baptism, but Jesus insisted. He needed something from God, which he received when he surrendered himself into the water at the hands of John.

I know there are other ways to look at this text. But I think we should allow Jesus to need something from God, to not always be in control, but to fall into the water, just like others at the hands of John.

Spiritual friendship, recognizing something moving deep within us, calling for attention, and finally surrendering to the grace of God so we can get on with it, this is our baptism into Christ.

Jesus' answer to John, "it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Much of Jesus' ministry and teaching was to fill up and complete the righteousness of God. No one I read is very confident with answers. Can we leave it, or do we need to figure it out. Let's leave it for now.

And then we come to act, the ritual, the baptism itself, the dropping into the water. My life of faith has been renewed over the past year in the brief pastoral work I have done. There is a creek running through properties where we live, called Allens Creek. I walk down to the creek with my dog at least twice a day to hear the sound of the running water, rushing louder with rain, living, moving water. Through the months, I began to hear in my mind, 'washed in the water of Christ.' The living moving water, cold and clean, says to me, you are

washed, refreshed and renewed in the waters of Christ. My dog Sophie and I visit at least twice a day.

The sacrament of baptism needs water. Jesus' baptism needed water. You need to touch the water and let it touch you. The Lord gives us this sacrament, this visible sign so we can experience the washing of new life in Christ. Spiritual life is meant to be filled with all the senses delivered to us. Touch, taste, aromas and fragrances, what we hear, beautiful music, and see, the light at the end of day, all meant to communicate to us the grace of God. I remember one instruction from my mother about baptizing infants, "Jim, dip your hand deep into the water and bring up as much as you can to baptize the child." Water makes it baptism. Water, the most fundamental need of all living things is water. It isn't baptism if there is no water.

When he came up out of the water, a dove comes floating out of the sky and lands on him. A voice calls out "this is my son." What capacity and power he received to do the will of God. In baptism you receive the capacity to do the will of God in our life.

Baptism is a sacrament that the Lord has given us. It belongs to Jesus Christ. It is the action of Jesus Christ in our lives, it is the beginning of our life in Christ, and continues throughout our lives. Spiritual friendship, awakening the call of God, surrendering into the water out of need for love and grace, fully soaked, and then surprised by the grace and capacity that God gives freely and unconditionally to do what we have been called to do.