

Why Baptize Jesus?

Matthew 3:13-17

March 26, 2017

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Imagine driving down Bayview to the 401 and being surprised to see a huge circus tent sitting in the parking lot at the mall at Bayview and York Mills. You notice that the sign in front of this tent says, "Gospel Revival Meeting, Every Night, 7:00 p.m. Everyone Welcome. Deacon John presiding."

Well, the opportunity to witness a bit of old-fashioned Bible-Belt America in modern Toronto is more than you can resist, so you park your car, and walk in.

The crowd, judging by the way most of the women have hats and long dresses, and most men are wearing dark blue suits—the crowd looks to be mostly members of Deacon John's ultra-conservative Primitive Baptist church. A few such churches continue to survive, even today. They sing *By the Old Rugged Cross*, and then Deacon John steps behind the pulpit. He turns out to be an intense orator, a stemwinder. Within minutes he has listed every sin imaginable and painted all the horrors of hell that await all those who do so sin.

After a while, Deacon John finishes with a flurry, and cries out: "Repent! Repent! for the ax is already at the root of the trees and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." Deacon John pounds away at his closing point.

And then Deacon John announces the altar call. "Come on down" he whispers. "Everyone who repents ought to come on down." A bit louder now. "Come on down, and I'll pray over you and give you over to the Lord." He's mesmerizing as he repeats the same refrain over and over. "Come on down. Repent."

A few people--probably members of Deacon John's church by the look of their clothes--rise to come on down, but you decide it's time to go home. You've seen enough.

But now imagine your great surprise, as you give the pulpit a final over the shoulder look—imagine your shock if you should see that one of the people who has responded to Deacon John's altar call is none other than Jesus himself.

See Jesus walk to the front of the tent. See Jesus kneel down at Deacon John's feet. See the crowd--see Deacon John--gasp in amazement. What would you think?

I think that you--along with Deacon John and his congregation--you would be just as shocked then as John the Baptist was shocked when he asked John to baptize him. You see, John had set up by the Jordan River, and he too had been preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" and for his altar call, John the Baptist had been inviting his audience receive a baptism of repentance. And one day, right out of the blue, Jesus answered John's altar call.

Naturally, John tried to discourage Jesus, to stop Jesus. After all, Jesus was supposed to be perfect, sinless even--or at least better than most. John did not believe Jesus needed to repent. So when Jesus answered John's altar call, John the Baptist refused to baptize him, and said, "You have it all wrong Jesus. I need to be baptized by you. I won't baptize you. No way. I'm not even worthy to untie the thongs of your sandals."

But Jesus insisted. Why would Jesus choose to be baptized?

Certainly, not for the same reason we baptize children. Jesus' baptism isn't anything like our church baptism.

You see, we baptize our children *into* the church. That is, according to the theology of pretty much every church today, baptism is the initiation ceremony that children or adults go through to become church members.

But this could not have been the reason Jesus was baptized. After all, there was no church in Jesus' day. The church wouldn't get its start till years later. Thus, this is a lousy text for a baptism Sunday.

So why did Jesus choose for baptism? Was it a P.R. stunt, maybe, a way to draw attention to the beginning of his ministry; a way to attract the attention of prospective disciples, much as Deacon John's tent might attract converts? That doesn't make sense either, because if you think about it, there isn't much P.R. value in lining up behind, and identifying with tax collectors, enemy collaborators, and people of ill-repute who really do need to repent.

So why did Jesus choose baptism? Well, at least in hindsight, the gospel writers saw Jesus' baptism as a foreshadowing, a promise, of his crucifixion.

In fact, Jesus sometimes described his crucifixion as a baptism. Just before his crucifixion, Jesus asked Peter, "Can you be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" And another time, speaking of the cross, Jesus said, "I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed." Matthew thought that Jesus invited John the Baptist to baptize him because by so doing, he was volunteering for crucifixion. Which is why Michelle's solo from the Messiah was so apt for today. It too points to Jesus' crucifixion.

Where does this leave us? Well, we are in the middle of Lent, the seven weeks before Easter when we contemplate the meaning of Jesus' suffering and death--the "why" of his first choosing and then marching on to this cruel baptism.

And this is what I think about that baptism of the cross.

Fifty years or more ago, a missionary in French Equatorial Africa was trying to explain to the Karre people what Jesus' suffering and death meant. Over and over he explained all the things Jesus

suffered to express divine solidarity with humans. Finally, one Karre person in the audience said, "if anyone did all that for us we would say, 'He's the one who falls down beside us'."

You see, the Karre people still remembered horrific stories about not-so ancient times, when their people were forced to carry heavy loads long distances for their colonial conquerors. Sometimes these Karre porters became sick with malaria or dysentery and could go no farther. The Europeans would leave them then, alone, alongside the road to fend for themselves or to die or be killed by wild animals. This was how colonialism worked. It was an ugly thing. It made the Karre people very suspicious of Western missionaries too, as was only right.

But if someone later found a downed porter lying there, and took pity on him, and stooped down to pick him up--porters were all men--and then helped him reach safety, the Karre villagers would speak of that saviour as "the one who fell down beside me."

By choosing baptism--the way of the cross--Jesus was intentionally choosing to fall down beside us.

Now, I can't say exactly what Jesus' connection to God was. And I wouldn't bet on the fact that a voice was really heard from heaven, saying that Jesus was God's beloved son--that seems, to me, to be a bit of poetic privilege Matthew used to make his point.

Still, even from a distance of 2000 years, I think Jesus was as close to God, as connected to the mystery of the divine, as any other human ever has been. Jesus sometimes even described himself as being "in God." I'd say that Jesus was so enmeshed with God that Jesus' falling down beside us actually counts as God's choice to enter into not just the best moments of our lives, but even the darkest, most difficult parts of our lives. In Jesus, God falls down beside us. In Jesus God joins us in the boat as we navigate the wild waters seeking to love and be loved.

I don't really get all this. There are great mysteries here, starting with what or who God actually is. Christian theology, after all, has always said God is ineffable, that is, unknowable. Still, in choosing to be baptized into the way of the cross, Jesus was making it plain that his view, at least, was that God is not like a Roman Emperor or even a democratic lawmaker or retail boss. Jesus is not into a God who snaps his fingers and expects to be obeyed, pronto. Jesus is not into a God who fixes things by sending CF-18s and military battalions to shut the Romans down and save Jesus from the trouble he's in.

The way of God in Jesus is not by might, not by power, but by falling down beside us, embracing us in our weakness and need rather than in our strength. Jesus embraces not just the good in us, but our messes and troubles and trials. Jesus does not offer a magical fix for these messes, but lures us, by his own example, into doing for others as he has done for us so that we may fall down for others, ourselves. This act, our falling down for others, is God with us and in us.

And so, while our church may have little in common with Deacon John's circus tent; and while you won't hear me preaching a stemwinder about heaven and hell and repentance, I do hope

that when our neighbours drive by on Bayview they'll say, "You know, I hear that in that church they take care of each other."

This, according to our text, is the way of righteousness.