Sermon on the Baptism of the Lord Year A 2023
(Matthew 3:13-17; Acts 10:34-43)

I’ve experienced this several times over the years, either after I’ve preached the sermon on this feast or at some other time a person will ask me one of two questions, the first being “why baptism?” I mean it’s a good question, what does pouring a bit of water on someone’s head have to do with someone’s core identity?

Or they’ll ask another question, “If Jesus was sinless why did he submit to John’s baptism which was a baptism of repentance?”

In answer to the first question, I can begin to wax eloquent around the centrality of water for all life, that all life emerged from water, that more than half of a human being is made up of water, which is astounding; and/or how access to clean water is probably one of the most telling and important signs of true progress in a society.

After that bit of rhetoric the person might stare at me blankly with that look that says, “hopeless, how is that an answer to my question?”

And they’d be right, however fascinating factoids about the importance of water for everything earth, for everything human are, they don’t answer the question that is being asked because baptism is not, truth be told, a sacrament meant to remind us of the importance of water generally.

The answer to “why Baptism” is really contained within the answer to the second question “If Jesus was sinless why did he submit to John’s baptism of repentance?”

This question is asked because often the notion of repentance is tied to an idea of past sins. Maybe we see in our minds eye a leering figure pointing a finger at us shouting “Repent!”

Repentance on this view becomes “feeling sorry for our past sins and promising we won’t do them again or at least try harder not to do them.”

On that definition clearly it would be confusing to ascribe to Jesus the need to repent. I mean, I’m sure like all human beings (if indeed we are taking his full humanity seriously?), Jesus would have made mistakes, things for which, after the fact, he may have thought things like, “I should have asked Joseph how to construct that dowl with a bit more precision;”

Maybe after he had gone to the temple as a 12-year-old without telling his parents, a story related to us by Luke, a disappearance that caused panic in his parents, after which he answered with cheek “why were you searching for me, did you not know that I must be in Father’s house?”

Maybe afterwards he thought, “maybe I didn’t need to say things quite like that!”

Making mistakes, needing to engage in ongoing learning, having to apologize for not completely understanding someone’s request or for burning the toast are not sins but part of the human condition; part of our finite nature.

When the tradition is claiming that Jesus was “sinless” it’s not making the claim that he wasn’t fully human; it’s making the claim that Jesus was not given to sins of commission; Jesus did not willfully break the 10 commandments; he did not perform willful wrong, wickedness or evil.

So, if it’s not for individual sins that Jesus submits to John’s baptism then why?

For starters this is clearly a big, big deal at the foundation of things. As Pope Francis has said, “something enormous happens. The heavens are torn open then, the Father’s voice is heard, and the Spirit is seen coming down in visible form upon Jesus. This is an epiphany of the Holy Trinity.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Why does this happen when Jesus identifies with a baptism of Repentance?

Well, if he had any sense that his calling was similar to John the Baptist’s; that is, that he was to be a reclusive prophet and thunderous prophet, he is now changing his mind about that!

Remember Repentance means “to change your mind.” If we ask “what is he changing his mind about?” it must have something to do with a decision to stand in solidarity with all sinners, with the world!

If religion is seen to be a judgemental separator of the righteous and the sinner, Jesus is saying, I choose to identify with the sinners? With those who regularly miss the mark, regularly find themselves living from what is less than their best self.

This is truly an amazing solidarity, and we must note that it is in that precise moment that this immense trinitarian epiphany takes place. As I’ve said before, for the Gospels to be God’s good news there can’t be any play-acting in them. And so Jesus *needs* this “baptism.”

Along those lines, Jesus also *needs* the affirmation he receives when he takes the risk of standing in full solidarity with the common human. “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased!

What pleases the Father? Just this: that Jesus is willing to stand in solidarity with all of us! With all of us in the crucial but difficult struggle to change our minds from selfish clinging to open, aware, loving living.

And it is the Spirit, the Spirit that shaped the world, the Spirit that breathes in and on and through all created things and beings that, at that moment lands on him.

It is the central affirmation that comes to him just as he is; he hasn’t yet ventured into his ministry into: You are Beloved, beloved by the Father and by Mother herself, Sophia, Wisdom, Spirit.

This is the moment that changes the trajectory of his life. Without this experience, without this fundamental affirmation we do not have the career of Jesus, the Christ. At least if we’re to take chronological time within the scriptures with any seriousness.

And speaking of time, what we celebrate today is not a past event but a present reality or shall I say possibility for all of us who are baptized into Christ.

It is the mission of the Church to fundamentally open up this reality for each person.

The Church is not an information dispenser, like in sermons, seminars, bible studies. Those things are only valuable in terms of *this reality*

**And this reality is that we form a loving attachment to God.**

The Grant study followed 268 men over 7 decades to discover what brings humans to joy. These men came from every sphere of society, every background, some were abused, some had everything handed to them on a silver platter.

In many cases, however, it was the men who had experienced hardship and neglect as children and teenagers but who found, at some point, maybe deep into adulthood, maybe in a third marriage! a loving attachment with a partner who fundamentally affirmed their belovedness; this made all the difference.

Often this sense of being affirmed led them to God!

The baptism of Jesus leads us here. We see it’s consequences work their way out in our second reading: Peter “holds” Cornelius’ soul in his hand. He has every reason to turn away from him as a violent abuser of Israel, that’s what centurions did; that’s their definition, if you will.

Cornelius himself, it appears, was desperate to find a way to God, he gave to the people he had previously (still?) oppressed but couldn’t find the affirmation he was looking for.

But Peter, fundamentally affirmed by the risen Christ by the sea of Galilee after Peter had betrayed him, was able, despite his misgivings, to be the conduit of the Holy Spirit for Cornelius and his family. Such is the power of the Father’s love for us.

*And so today, as we baptize Trinity, we remind ourselves—and this will come out forcefully in the baptismal covenant that we will recite together—that Jesus’ baptism is the pattern of ours.*

When we prayer “Our Father” at the end of the Great Thanksgiving we are invoking all we celebrate today, Jesus’ relationship with the Father that has become ours in his baptism and by the Spirit.

Our sense of solidarity with each other and indeed with everyone and everything. As we help each other, we are enabled to go into and through the wildernesses of our lives, we are able to open doors for others because we’re no longer fighting for our own identity. God is pleased…with you! Can you bear it?

1. Homiletic Directory, p. 72 several points in my discussion in the next few paragraphs are spurred by Pope Francis’ comments. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)