

When I was a junior in college, I had the opportunity to take a course in Europe during the month of January, travelling to several different cities in 5 different countries. During our stay in Paris, we took a trip to the Louvre – the famous art museum, home to such masterpieces as the Venus de Milo, and of course, the Mona Lisa. But before you get into the museum, you enter into a large courtyard with a glass pyramid at the center. And as you can imagine the courtyard is packed with tourists. And I learned on that day at the Louvre, that wherever there are large amounts of tourists, there is a high probability that there will also be a large amount of pigeons. Now these pigeons aren't afraid of people. In fact, they seem to quite like people a lot. So much so that they are loathe to move out of your walking path and seem to enjoy swooping around you and even onto you.

You know, scientifically speaking, there is next to no difference between pigeons and doves. And so I find it curious that when we hear the story of Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit is often described as a dove, which "alights" on Jesus. How beautiful. How wonderful. How peaceful. Except that that would make the Holy Spirit the most graceful and in-control dove/pigeon the world has ever known. Because let's be real: they're not the most graceful flyers. They more swoop and dive erratically. But in a way, I kind of like that. I like the idea of the Holy Spirit crashing into Jesus like a pigeon on a mission.

I mean that's the Holy Spirit way, isn't it? Not just all of the various ways that the Spirit shows up in Scripture, like on Pentecost, but also in our own lives. Just think for a moment of the times when you have been struck with some kind of spiritual inspiration or insight. Was it more of a peace dove "alighting" on you or like you've just been dive-bombed by a pigeon? Often the Holy Spirit moves and acts in ways we don't expect and in ways that we aren't always prepared for. The Spirit has a knack for catching us off-guard and shocking us into realizing the moment of God's presence before us.

You might be surprised to know that passages in the Gospels about Jesus' baptism were of great controversy in the early church. Some scholars even say that it was a source of shame and embarrassment to the early Christians. The reason being that if Jesus is the Son of God, who has no need of repentance, then why would he subject himself to being baptized by John, who preached repentance and who was to pave the way for Jesus, who was said to be greater than John? If Jesus' baptism was, as we understand our baptism, an act of repentance, which sets the baptized free from sin and death, then why would Jesus need to be baptized at all?

My grandma on my mom's side had what I would call a very human life. By that, I mean that she experienced a lot of good things and she also experienced a lot of hard things – things like loss and hurt and suffering, a lot of which she brought on herself. She was an alcoholic. She tried to hide her extreme cigarette usage, even though everyone knew she was easily a pack-a-day smoker. But she was also one of the most kind and gentle and generous people you would ever meet. She was the kind of person who would, as they say, "give you the shirt off her back." And I remember as a kid that one of the things she would tell us grandchildren was perhaps something you all have heard before, too: She would tell us, "Do as I say and not as I do."

Which of course is a classic definition of hypocrisy. But if you knew her and you knew the kind of heart she had, you also understood that she knew what she was saying. She knew that what she said and what she did didn't always line up. And she knew that it resulted in immense amount of pain in her life – pain that she didn't want her grandkids to suffer. On the flip side, she also knew what it was to do good – to be generous, to be kind, to serve and love others. And though she knew she often failed to live up to that standard of goodness, she hoped that her words would be enough to inspire her grandkids to make different choices. She did what she could when she felt helplessly lost.

Jesus doesn't need to be baptized – at least not in the sense that he needs repentance and freedom from sin. And yet, in another sense, he absolutely does need to be baptized. Because if Jesus is truly to be Emmanuel – "God with us" – then he has to be with us in everything, even in our need for repentance and renewal. It does us no good to have a savior who only cosplays as a human or pretends to deal with the struggles of this world. We need a Savior who experiences the conflict of our nature – that though we may know what is good and right and holy, we fail to live that way in every moment. We need a Savior who has experienced the outpouring of God's mercy and blessing through the Holy Spirit. We need a Savior who graciously leads and invites us again and again to follow him, even when we've fallen short.

My friends in Christ, by his baptism at the Jordan, it is affirmed that Jesus is the one we have hoped for; the one who will take all things – including our sin and brokenness, pain and suffering – into himself so that all will be made new; the one who is God with Us. And just as the Holy Spirit was poured out upon Christ in blessing at the beginning of his ministry, so also the same Spirit is given to you and to me. So that we could know the blessing of God in our lives. But even more, so that we, imperfect as we are, can be the blessing of God in the world. Amen.