

“The Power to Serve”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church — Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Matthew 3: 13-17**  
**Acts 10: 34-43**

To be dunked or not to be dunked. To be sprinkled or not to be sprinkled. To be baptized as a baby, to wait and be baptized as a youth or an adult. These are the questions which seem to fill the debates throughout history in the church. Baptists require you to be dunked, wait until you're an adult, and you must be baptized in the Baptist church even if already baptized somewhere else. Presbyterians normally baptize when you're an infant, more often than not with some sprinkles on the top of the head, and once you're baptized you're baptized for life, wherever it may have been. Unfortunately, these debates have caused deep divisions in the church universal over hundreds of years. Why? Well, I suppose it goes back to the fact that we as human beings are fallible and we let such small differences as how we should be baptized turn into major divides between denominations.

What I find interesting about Jesus' baptism is that the debate wasn't over how he was to be baptized. John didn't ask him, “Would you prefer to be sprinkled or dunked, Jesus?” What John had at his disposal was the River Jordan, and the only real way to baptize someone at a river is to go all the way under! And at this point in Jesus' life he was already an adult, so there was no debate about at what age he should come for baptism with his parents or guardians.

No, the debate in this case was whether John should baptize Jesus at all. John was unsure as to his authority to do such a thing for the “one who is more powerful than I coming after me” (3:11). He knew how great Jesus was to be, for the two of them were the gifts of the Holy Spirit to Elizabeth and Mary. Jesus was the King of kings who would come to judge the world, to separate the wheat from the chaff, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, not with water. Why would Jesus want John to baptize him with water, when he was the Son of God?

Jesus answers his question by saying: “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” It is not a clear answer, but it points to who Jesus is and what his role is in God's plan. Jesus is God in flesh and bone, a human being who walks and talks and thinks and feels. It is “proper” for Jesus to come to John who baptizes humans, for it is as a human being that Jesus is to minister to God's world. It is as a human being that he teaches God's Word, heals the lame, cures the sick, welcomes the children, rebukes the Pharisees, and experiences the pain and suffering of death on a cross. Jesus is God's agent of change and love and peace to the world, and is sealed as God's agent in his human baptism in the Jordan. Only his baptism is

marked by the arrival of the Holy Spirit, a sign that God is truly a part of what he is doing. “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (3:17)

Everyone should hear that statement whenever someone is baptized in the church. “This is my son, my daughter, my children, with whom I am well pleased.” The sign of baptism is that we as Christians are sealed by the grace of God with water, as was the case with Jesus in the Jordan. It is a ritual which remembers his action, an example to his disciples and to us all. In baptism we are claimed by God, we are protected by God, we are moved by God and the Spirit to be agents of God for the glory of God. Jesus insisted on being baptized by John so that those who follow him would do so in remembrance of him. That is the meaning of Jesus’ baptism by John.

Our baptism is not a one-time thing. It is something which we continually reaffirm and profess our faith in through worship, prayer, and service to God. And every time we reaffirm and remember our baptism, we are reminded how that gift of grace gives us the power to serve in Christ’s name each and every day of our lives.

Our passage from Acts speaks to this ability to serve through the power of baptism. Peter is preaching to Cornelius, seeking to convert him, and indeed, following our passage, Cornelius is baptized. But in this passage, we see the crux of what Jesus’ baptism does for all his followers. It was the baptism that John had announced: “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.” And it was through that baptism which gave Jesus the power to “do good and heal all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.” Through baptism, God was with him.

Peter then ties Jesus’ baptism to our lives of faith. “We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear to us who were chosen by God as witnesses.” And just as Jesus was blessed with the power to serve, Peter and the apostles were blessed with the power to serve: “He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God.”

Notice that Peter keeps using the word “witness.” We witness the grace of God before us in the person of Jesus Christ, and we are witnesses to others concerning his glory. As witnesses of God’s glory, we are compelled to act upon the call of God that we have heard, serving Jesus Christ with all our talents and gifts that God has given to us. It may be as a teacher, as a mentor to a young person, as a volunteer, as a good samaritan to a stranger — there is no set “formula” to act on God’s call. But what is certain is that we have been blessed by the Spirit through our baptism, and it is “proper” to respond to that blessing through dedication and service to him. Why? Because through the power of baptism, we are blessed with the power to serve the one who gives us everlasting life in his life, death and resurrection.

Ultimately, though, baptism is our reminder that we are connected to one another, in the Body of Christ, and we draw strength from the Spirit’s

presence as we stand with one another. Consider this story by Presbyterian author, Michael Lindvall:

*One Sunday, not all that long after he began his ministry, the pastor found one of his members sitting alone, weeping, in the sanctuary after a baptism, which in that little church traditionally involved the grandparents and aunts and uncles all standing up as the newest member of their family was held by the minister for the sacrament.*

*The member weeping was Mildred Cory and through her tears she told the pastor that her daughter Tina had just had a baby boy. She was thinking about his baptism. The pastor told her to have Tina and her husband give him a call so they could make the arrangements.*

*"Tina's got no husband," Mildred said. "She's eighteen, was confirmed in this church just four years ago. She used to come out for the Senior High Fellowship, but then she started to see this older boy." She hesitated and then the rest of the story came tumbling out. "She got pregnant and that Jimmy joined the Air Force and she decided to keep the baby. She wants to have him baptized here, in her church, but she's nervous to come talk with you preacher.*

*Tina's situation raised eyebrows and was controversial enough that the Session had a discussion about the appropriateness of the whole matter before approving the baptism, which it did. The real problem, everybody knew, was when the pastor got to the part when the whole family stands up, there wasn't going to be any and her situation would be there for everyone to see.*

*So the day arrived, and the church was full. After the sermon an elder announced "Tina Corey presents her son for baptism." Down the aisle she came, nervously, shaking slightly with month-old Jimmy in her arms, a blue pacifier stuck in his mouth. The scene hurt all right, every bit as much as they knew it would. So young this mother was, and so alone.*

*"Who stands with this child?" the pastor asked and Mildred, Tina's mother, stood up all by herself.*

*He was just about to ask Tina the parents' questions of faith when he became aware of movement in the pews. Elderly Angus McGreggor had stood up in his blue serge suit, his wife Minnie beside him. Then a couple other elders stood up, then the sixth grade Sunday School teacher stood up, then a new young couple in the church, and soon, before his incredulous eyes, the whole church was standing up with little Jimmy* (Michael Lindvall, "Christmas Baptism," Good

News from North Haven, 181-187).

If we are to take our baptism seriously, then we must be willing to stand up with all our sisters and brothers in Christ at this font. For it is at this font that we are given the power to serve our Lord all the days of our life. So come, reaffirm this gift of grace, and never be afraid to stand up as a member of the Body of Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.