

“Who We Are By Whose We Are”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22**

Baptism is important to us as Christians. It marks us. It claims us. It identifies us as one of God's own. And I wonder if there are times that our seriousness about baptism has led to more problems within the church.

We disagree on how much water is necessary to achieve a proper baptism: a sprinkling, a bowlful, or a river-full. We disagree on whether you need to be a child or an adult to be baptized, you know, for it “to be real.” We disagree on whether a baptism performed in one denomination should be accepted in another. All these disagreements just prove to me how much we as humans have managed to foul up something so simple in God's eyes.

That simple thing is this: in this act of worship, we are professing our need for rebirth by the grace of God. In the person of John the Baptist we hear God saying to us the meaning of baptism: to repent and turn from our sinful ways, so we might serve God in a new and positive way. It doesn't matter whether you were dunked or sprinkled, whether you were baptized as an infant, a teenager, or an adult. What matters is that we have received God's grace in the waters of baptism, so we might follow our lives along God's desired path.

After that description of baptism, it may lead one to wonder why Jesus himself had to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. Traditionally, the Sunday after Epiphany is the day we celebrate this event in Jesus' life, and it often causes us to stop and ask why. If baptism is an act of repentance, an act for sinners seeking forgiveness, then why would Jesus need to be immersed in the waters of the Jordan? Why would our Savior and King need to humble himself if he himself was sinless in God's eyes? It is an important question to ask if we are to accept God's Light into our hearts and world during this season after Christmas.

It is a question others have asked, as well. One preacher writes:

What was Jesus doing there in the first place? John made it clear that his baptism was for sinners, sinners who came to him to be washed in the waters of repentance and rise from them to go and sin no more. What need did Jesus have of a bath like that? He was, according to every eyewitness, a man set apart by his sinlessness. He had nothing to repent of and nothing to be forgiven for. How much more appropriate it would have been if he had walked up to John and said, “Thank you for all your preparations, my friend. I will take over now.” But that is not

what he did. In fact, there is not a single story in all of the gospels about Jesus baptizing anyone. His disciples baptized, Paul baptized, but Jesus did not, because he did not come to claim power but to give it away.

So he did not take over John the Baptist's ministry. Instead, he got in with a whole crowd of sorry-looking people and took his turn in the Jordan like everyone else. Nothing unusual so far. It was after his baptism, as he was praying, that the remarkable thing happened. Heaven opened, the clouds parted, white light poured through, and a figure that looked a lot like a bird, but most of all like something straight from the heart of God, settled on Jesus as a voice from somewhere other than earth told what it meant. "You are my son, my beloved," the voice said, "and I am very pleased with you" (Barbara Brown Taylor, Mixed Blessings, Cowley Publications, Boston, 1986, 57-58).

Wouldn't it be nice if we could have that experience, too? When we are in the midst of a difficult decision, or are stuck in a swamp of malaise, it would be great to hear this voice from above saying, "You are my son, you are my daughter, and I am very pleased with you." I mean, what better way of knowing that you are doing the right thing than to have the "voice from heaven" affirmation?

Needless to say, that is rarely the case for us. Instead of a booming voice telling us things will be all right, it is an ambivalent sign, or conflicting messages, or even silence. It is never perfectly cued up like Jesus' event in the Jordan; it is often a day, or a week, or a year later than we would prefer. As we read this account of Jesus' baptism in Luke, we can often be left wondering, "Why can't God speak to me like that?"

The truth is, God speaks to us the way God speaks to us, and that is not by a voice from above. Instead, it is in ways that speak directly to us, if only we are open to hear. What hasn't changed from that day at the Jordan and today is why God speaks to us. God speaks to his children to guide them and lead them along the path of service they are called to follow. In the same way God spoke and said, "I am pleased with my son for the path he has chosen," so, too, does God say to each of us, "Follow me along this path, and I will be pleased with you."

That is at the heart of baptism, and it is our reminder that who we are is constituted by whose we are. Joyce Shin writes: We are constituted by others' claims on us. I am who I am in my relationships with and responsibilities for others. My daughter places claims on me; so does my spouse. My parents too place claims on me. All of these familial relationships make me who I am. We are also constituted by God's claim on us. Our identity is inseparable from our relationship to and responsibility toward God.

God's claim on us, however, is more radical than any other. To belong to the Creator is much more radical than to belong to any clan.

To be claimed by God the Creator puts us in relationship with all of creation and carries with it a sense of responsibility for all of creation, all of humanity. As a child of God, I am related to and responsible for every child of God.

Baptism is the church's age-old ritual that symbolizes God's claim on us . . . Water and the Spirit, not flesh and blood, seal our identities as children of God ([Christian Century](#), January 6, 2016, 20).

In these waters, our identity is forged by the claim God makes on us as one of his children. These baptismal waters not only mark us as individuals, but they connect us one to another as the Body of Christ. And yet, they are not meant to be kept within the boundaries of the church or any insulated "clan." These baptismal waters claim us to turn around and head out on a life-long journey of discipleship, service, and witness to the one who comes and gets in the river with all the other sorry-looking people and tells them – and us – "I love you as God loves you."

John Leith, a Presbyterian professor and theologian, liked to say that every human life is rooted in the will and intention of God: "In baptism the child's name is called because our faith is that God thought of this child before the child was, that God gave to this child an identity, an individuality, a name, and a dignity that no one should dare abuse. Human existence has its origin not in the accidents of history and biology, but in the will and intention of the Lord God, creator of heaven and earth."

We need to hear this affirmation from God, and we need to hear it from each other. These are life-giving words that every human being upon this earth should hear: "You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." When Jesus heard those words, they changed his life forever. They will do the same for our children, our neighbors, our spouses, our church members, and, Jesus promised, even our enemies (Robert M. Brearley, [Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1](#), Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 240).

(Walk over the baptismal font.) Do you hear that? Can you feel that? Those are the waters of your being claimed by a loving, faithful God. God is saying, "This is my son, this is my daughter, this is my child, with whom I am well-pleased." How will you leave here and live as witnesses to this blessing?

Thanks be to God for the waters that claim us as God's very own. Amen.