

Sermon for the Feast of the Baptismal of our Lord – Matthew 3:13-17

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Identity is a hot button topic today. We can choose what we want to reveal about our identity, who we are and so forth. In other ways, our identity is given to us. The federal government identifies you as a 9 digit number and name who earns and/or receives money and/or is dependent upon someone who does, who owes taxes. We are a son or daughter of a mom and dad. Perhaps we are a father or mother to sons and daughters.

If someone were to say you to “Tell me about yourself,” What would you say? Well, I work at such and such place doing this or that. So they respond, “That’s your work, but tell me about you.” Well, I’m married to so and so and my dad is so and so. That’s your family, but tell me about you. Well I enjoy hiking, watching baseball, and spending time with my dog. Those are your hobbies, but I want to know about you. But as you keep stripping down the layers, what is there really left to say?

The third chapter of Matthew’s Gospel has the answer. John the Baptizer identifies the crowds who would come out to the wilderness to hear him. “All of you, whoever you are, no matter what your identity or title is, you must repent. Abandon your godlessness and sinful life; turn and mend your ways and prepare the way for the Lord who was promised to you and who has now been sent to bring you all grace and salvation. Repent if you want to escape the wrath and judgment of God and have a share in the kingdom of heaven that now draws near. Believe this judgment of God against you: all of you are sinners and condemned because of your sin and you possess nothing that could save you.”

But we’re not all that different from the crowd back then. Have we not also fallen into the made-up dream and presumption that our self-chosen way and identity are best? Have we considered ourselves to be the cream of the crop and believed the horrible delusion that our sinfulness, envy, and faithlessness do not exist in our minds and hearts? We choose to stand fast and persist in our old ways. We no longer think about or deliberate whether we are sinners and that we really need help. Making amends for the past, paying it forward, or whatever you want to call our works are of no help or use to us in achieving salvation. Even if we strive with all our might, on account of our merit, we will not be forgiven or taken to heaven. We are mistaken and deluding ourselves. Our deeds and the deeds of all men are far too little to take away even the tiniest sin. We only make things go from bad to worse if we think we can do it on our own. It’s called the “FORGIVENESS of sins,” not our payment for our sins. It is a gift. Not a merit. What God bestows on us out of pure grace for the sake of Christ is something for which we cannot pay Him, or buy or earn it from Him. He helps us and delivers us. He takes away our sins and gives us a clean conscience.

So we too must abandon our self-chosen salvation which is apart from God’s Word and command. We must abandon our presumption and self-confidence in our own righteousness and crawl to the cross. We must acknowledge ourselves as poor condemned sinners who cannot save ourselves. We must believe in Christ, the Lamb of God, who bears our sins and the sins of the whole world, who died for them and made satisfaction for them. We take comfort that we are baptized in His Name and that in our Baptism we have put on Him, together with all that He possesses.

Repentance is not real if we intend only to make satisfaction and pay for our sins through our own deeds. We are by nature sinners and children of wrath. We are not able to blot out our sins, but only increase them. True repentance is when we believe God's Word that accuses us and shows us that we are sinners who stand before God condemned. We have disobeyed Him and not kept His Commandments in thought, word, and deed.

And yet we need not despair, because John the Baptizer identifies more than the crowd and us: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." We are directed to Christ who freely gives us grace and help. In Him only we find it. He is the Lamb of God appointed from eternity to bear the sin of the world and to pay for it with His death.

This Christ, in His life, never sinned. He had no need of repentance, Baptism, or the forgiveness of sins. And yet, "Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him." Why does He come to be baptized, seeing that He is without any sin or impurity for Baptism to take away? Isn't He already holy? John the Baptizer thought so when he said, "I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" Why did Jesus need to be baptized? Let us return to the Holy Scriptures for Jesus' answer: "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

That's a peculiar phrase, "to fulfill all righteousness." Notice it's not "to fulfill all justice." Justice is fulfilled in the Law. "Fulfilling all righteousness" is another matter. Paul speaks of this righteousness: "For our sakes, [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." The pure sinless One is made to be sin, so that we sinners are made to be pure and sinless. Elsewhere St. Paul says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." Christ became sin and a curse for us.

John the Baptizer testified: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." "Behold the Lamb of God": Christ must be completely holy, innocent, and pure. "Who takes away the sin of the world": He must be judged the Sinner alone who takes away the sin of the world. As the Holy Spirit said through the prophet Isaiah, "He has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." He became the Sinner who has all our sin placed upon Him. He received baptism - not in respect to Himself, being innocent and spotless, but for your sake, whose sin He bears. As He was pure and holy and innocent, He could have chosen to remain this way and neither been baptized or crucified. He didn't. He did it for you.

Why did Jesus have to be baptized? So that His death and resurrection can be connected to you in your Baptism. Christ's death and resurrection remains no mere historical fact. No. His death and resurrection must come to you in today's world by Holy Baptism. Again, St. Paul says it best: "We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." The benefits of the cross and empty tomb are yours by the washing of water and the Word.

Believe in Christ. He is Lamb of God who takes your sin upon Himself. He was born for you. He was baptized for you. He suffered for you. He was crucified and died for the sake of your sin. You are freed from your sins. You are beloved by God. He also says of you, "This is my beloved child, with whom I am well-pleased." Your identity is in Him. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠