

Beloved

Matthew 3:13—17; Isaiah 42:1—9

Was this really necessary? Is this really necessary? For two summers she did what she was baptized to do. With the Mission Outreach Teams from *Ballysally Presbyterian Church* and *Saintfield Presbyterian Church*, the woman who became known as Renee Nicole Good helped disillusioned teenagers in Northern Ireland. She led their Bible Studies, listened to the outpouring of their hearts, prayed with them and then wrote poetry about her experience: “make room for wonder.” And then came her last spoken words, uttered with a smile on a street in Minneapolis. To the ICE agent who would shoot her she said, “Dude, I’m not mad at you.” Was this really necessary? Is it necessary? And is it really necessary that Jesus, of all people, get baptized? I mean, can’t we just forego this formality... this ritual... Isn’t it the thought that counts and not the splashing around of water? I wanted to talk with you today about a conundrum, a dilemma, a quizzical state of mind. Today, in Matthew’s Gospel, John the Baptist is standing waist deep or knee deep or ankle deep in a river that ripples and roars. The river was once the famous boundary that marked out the entrance into a land flowing with milk and honey. Now, however, it’s a kinda joke. Now, the Romans occupy and oppress every square inch of the so-called Promised Land. And John’s out there—way out there—ranting and raving at both the civic and religious authorities. He’s been saying all along that God’s Anointed King is coming... and with Jesus right in front of him, it’s sort of awkward. You see, not only is Jesus John’s cousin; but if Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah—if Jesus is the reason everyone’s been getting baptized for the forgiveness of sins—for the changing of their minds—does it make any sense to baptize him too? Is this really necessary?

I once had my hand stamped to get into a water park. I had already paid for my ticket but had to go out to the parking lot to retrieve some extra diapers, and the attendant stamped my hand in order that he could verify my legitimacy as a patron who would return to all the fun and adventure. But, you see, he didn't ask if later in the week, that coming Sunday, I would be qualified to baptize with water... or to have my own baptism renewed in the water. He wasn't interested in my spiritual identity. So that's what we're up against.

A spiritual identity 'in Christ' is paradoxical—in that it is no longer *I who live, but Christ living in me—in the flesh*. And what better way to feel that flesh than to douse it with water, then to have this very commonplace thing take us down to the primordial waters of the deep. The guy at the water park has no clue about that kind of identity. And I do wonder for myself, if not for all of us, if we all might need a refresher. One of my seminary teachers gave the example of a fatigued swimmer who is drowning in the middle of a lake. He's thrown a rope, and the person, who intends to save him pulls him to shore. And the first thing that breathless, flailing human being says, once he is safe in the shallows, is not 'I grabbed the rope'—because that would be the ego talking. By contrast, if the rescued person says anything it's '*Thank you*' or it's '*You saved me.*' Another story to make a similar point is told by Soren Kierkegaard, who describes a person, who wants everyone on shore to see her. The water is not over her head, but she pretends that it is to impress people. She's perfectly capable standing up. But she's so invested in having other people validate her ego, she misses the point. Holy Baptism has never been about the 'Look At Me' posture that's so prevalent in today's culture. Quite the contrary.

So, let me return to the question that must have been on the mind of John the Baptist before Jesus convinces him that “*it’s proper FOR US to fulfill all righteousness.*” And please notice the plural pronoun “**US**”—which suggests this baptism is not about an individualistic achievement, but about receiving a community—the community of creation and the community of those who are willing to lose their lives for the sake of the gospel. And that’s known as a Covenant. Baptism is therefore that covenant whereby I commit to being disciplined, or submit to being disciplined, by my specific encounters with you, and you with me and us with Christ.

In the musical adaptation of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, the main character goes by the name, Jean Valjean; and when we meet him at the start of the story, he also goes by another identity: he is *Prisoner 24601*. And I wonder if we can relate. I’m not necessarily identifying anyone here as a prisoner, or as a rehabilitated criminal, or a person on parole. But I am mindful how we live into our identities and how adopt aliases. And *Prisoner 24601* is no different. He’s released and can’t get work because of the papers that identify him. And when he finally stumbles into a church, it’s all ‘*blah, blah, blah, God loves you, wah, wah, wah.*’ After being welcomed for a meal and given a bed, Valjean wakes up in the middle of the night and steals all the silver he can lay his hands on. He runs and is caught. The police catch him. He lies—telling them the priest had given him the silver. They take him back to the church in shackles. And when the priest tells the police that what Valjean says is true, that he’d given him the silver, and that in fact, he left so early, he left the best behind, everything’s about to change. Even *Prisoner 24601*. Now, I don’t mind telling you, every time I experience, *Les Misérables*, which is French for the *Miserable Ones*, I’m not so miserable.

I'm not so miserable when I hear lyrics like these:

Yet why did I allow this man
To touch my soul and teach me love
He treated me like any other
He gave me his trust, he called me brother
My life he claims for God above
Can such things be...

What I'm getting at is IDENTITY. The Baptism of Jesus confirms an on-going and unfolding identity that's going to include some of the most anguished questions we can ask. And the reason the water is so crucial is that without it touching our skin and cascading down our foreheads, well, the whole Christian faith is just a nice idea, just a thought, just a belief system. On the other hand, with the water, a voice may break through the *Blah, Blah, Blad, Wat, Wat, Wat.*

Beloved. Think of it. Every day, you and I are bombarded with requests or demands for an identity, and we're so compliant because... why not? *Here's my card. Here's my birth certificate. Here's my driver's license. Here's my user-id. Here's my high school diploma. Here's my voter registration. Blah, blah, blah.* But what about the identity that matters the most and that cuts through all the bureaucracy and chatter? What about the identity that going to matter when someone tells you that you're not good enough, not old enough, not young enough, not qualified enough... not good-looking enough... not American enough... not religiously committed to certain doctrines enough. In Christ, it's enough to hear that you are, I am, we are, the Beloved.

Before meeting and marrying Sheryl, I had been involved with a young woman I met in college; and thinking that a pastor needs a wife, I asked her to marry me and she said *Yes*. I bought her a ring and a hope chest. She and her family bought a wedding dress. And then, to make a long story short, everything fell apart. Over the phone, she said she wanted to take a break, and I know what that meant. And so, we broke off the engagement. I felt unloved and unlovable... Until something amazing happened. My fellow students at seminary gathered around me one night and renewed my baptism. They actually laid their hands on my head and my shoulders; as my tears mingled with the water pouring over my body, I didn't experience love in general, love as a vague idea or love as an ideal that's never quite achieved, but a kind of specifically-crafted embrace, designed specifically for me: and I knew something about my own ego was fading away, being eroded, being washed away. And I let it happen.

In a book entitled, *In Jesus' Name*, Henri Nouwen writes,

“The love that often leaves us doubtful, frustrated, angry, resentful is the second love, that is to say, the affirmation, affection, sympathy, encouragement, and support we receive from our parents, teachers, spouses and friends. We all know how limited, broken and very fragile that love is. Behind the many experiences of this second love there is always the chance of rejection, withdrawal, punishment, blackmail, violence and hatred... The radical good news is that the second love is only a broken reflection of the first love and that the first love is offered to us by a God in whom there are no shadows. Jesus heart is the incarnation of the shadow-free first love God. From his heart flow streams of living water...” [26-27].

No one here this morning should feel under any obligation. God's love for you and for me is intact and unrelenting. Everyone here is already beloved. But, you see, with the waters of Holy Baptism that first love of God redeems and recalibrates the second loves which sometimes fail us and falter.

You, of course, have good friends here. There are married couples, parents and children here today who have gathered because they feel they feel the intimacy of those bonds and rightfully celebrate them. But what troubles me is that, as hospice chaplain, I've seen people grow old and forget, and lose touch and become bitter; and maybe deep down they wonder about a love without those shadows.

I was visiting a beloved patient recently, and she was no longer able to speak; and I could hear the rattling of her breath with each inhale and exhale. And on the television in her room a nurse had clicked on some streaming music, *ZZ Top*. And after some prayers, I thought, 'the heck with that...' and I took the remote control, and scrolled through films like *Godfather*, *Nacho Libre* and *O Brother Where Art Thou*, all of which (believe it or not) include references to baptism from that second-love or egocentric point of view. And then I saw it, the 1980's television series called Jesus of Nazareth. And before exiting the room, I clicked on the link and let the words flutter around the room: ***Beloved. Beloved. Beloved... This is my Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased.***