

The Baptism of Jesus Christ

This week, we pause and reflect on the gift we receive as we claim the grace of Jesus Christ through baptism. This is an appropriate time to remember baptism in the life of the church. The baptism of Jesus is taken as the beginning of His ministry, at about age 30.

The text focuses on Jesus' baptism in the Gospel of Matthew; yet, the whole reason that Jesus chose to participate in John's call to a baptism of repentance is to express solidarity with sinful people in need of grace, as it says, "When all the people were being baptized. We are all present with Jesus in that water and can rightly celebrate our baptism as we honor his.

Yet Matthew understates the whole event in a typical style. You can almost miss the weight of this moment in the scant five verses that are given to telling the story. All the questions we think we really need answered are seemingly unimportant to Matthew. The issues that caused debates and division – how much water was used, whether they were dunking, splashing, pouring with a bucket, or sprinkling. What was the precise liturgical wording of the ritual – don't appear in the account. There is no note about whether the Baptist was doing it correctly. But God was there! God was there in Jesus and in the Father, and I'm pretty sure He was there in the Spirit, too.

Having waded through John's words during Advent, we now get to the point. Jesus appears, according to Matthew, to be baptized by John. You'll notice that John has as much of a problem with this as we do. Matthew is the only one to give us this conversation. Perhaps the intent is to help explain this odd behavior by Jesus. "Let it be so for now," Jesus says. The "now" is important. Now concerns identification with humanity, not the essential nature of Christ. Or rather, Christ's essential nature is about that identification. The "righteousness" he is fulfilling is the righteousness of the mission. I can be who I need to be in this way, perhaps. I can do what I am here to do in this way.

Then John consented, or, in the KJV, "suffered." Reluctantly? It seems so. Consented doesn't sound like wholehearted support. The Greek here could be translated as "sent." Perhaps John just sent Jesus along in the line of people being baptized by his disciples. Maybe John has misgivings; he doesn't see the bigger picture yet. But he consented. At least we assume so, since Matthew says nothing about the actual baptism.

The very next verse says, "When Jesus had been baptized," and we missed it! We didn't even get a chance to take a photo with the pastor!

Perhaps we've been wrestling with the wrong stuff. Maybe it isn't about the amount of water used or the position of the body being baptized. Maybe it isn't about the right formula or specific words spoken. Maybe it isn't about the person being baptized at all. Maybe it's

about the relationship being established in that sacrament – a relationship with the God who pours out grace and with the community that receives the grace-filled new member of the body of Christ.

John might have been uncertain, unable to see the big picture, but the voice from heaven proclaimed that God was not hesitant and claimed this moment wholeheartedly. The heavens opened, the Spirit descended, and the voice spoke. “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

So, who was all that for, that opening of heaven and the voice from on high? Matthew says, “He saw the Spirit,” indicating it was a private vision. But the voice says, “This is my beloved,” not. “You are.” It seems to be an announcement to everyone. Other versions are just as vague. Who is it for, this appearance of the Godhead?

Clearly, it is for us. The readers, the church that would be constituted by baptism; that’s why Matthew tells us this story. It is so that we know, first, that Jesus claimed solidarity with us by submitting to a baptism of repentance, even though he was without sin. But we also know we share in the pleasure of God, who claims us as beloved children.

First, this concerns Jesus, the one we follow, the one for whom we are making disciples. He is our example. He shows us how it is all to be done.

Then, it is about us. So we celebrate baptism, we celebrate belonging, we celebrate that God is well pleased with the body of Christ. And we invite. Call folks forward into this celebration of the body, to the joy of the Lord. It is an appropriate time for an invitation to discipleship, the right time for the call to service.

Amen