



**“Jesus’ Baptism and Ours”**  
**Scripture – Matthew 3:13-17**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, January 8, 2017**

Last week I met a friend for lunch and an acquaintance stopped by our table to say hello. I recognized her immediately, asked about her mother who has been ill, and we conversed for a couple of minutes. I imagine she was expecting me to introduce her, but I did not. Why? Because I could not remember her name to save my life!

I knew who she was, I remembered where she worked, and I recalled everything I knew about her – except her name. Surely that has never happened to you!

We cannot make it through life without an occasional uneasy moment and this morning’s passage describes one for – of all people – John the Baptist. He had built a reputation as a man in control of every situation. The son of a priest, John was a fiery preacher who called on people to turn their lives in a new direction and be baptized, and the people in the nearby villages were trudging out to the Jordan River to have John cleanse them of their sins. He was baptizing one after another, and the line of people seemed endless. He dunked one under, brought him up, and then moved to the next. About the time he had a nice rhythm going, taking hold of one after another, he suddenly froze. Standing face-to-face with him was Jesus, his cousin.

It created a very awkward moment for John and he blurted out, “I need to be baptized by you.” Yet, Jesus urged John to proceed. Despite the ticklish situation, John did baptize Jesus. When Jesus came up from the water, the heavens opened, he saw God’s Spirit descend on him, and he heard a voice say, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Not only was this an uncomfortable moment for John the Baptist, but it was embarrassing for the early church. If John the Baptist was performing a Jewish ritual that focused on cleansing one of sin, then why would Jesus need to be baptized?

We sense the unease in the early church when we compare the different gospels. According to Mark, the earliest gospel, John the Baptist appears to have no compunction about baptizing Jesus. Jesus makes the request, John complies and that is that.

However, when we turn to the Gospel of Matthew, written a decade or two later than Mark, the hesitation of John the Baptist shows up in the story.

Then, if we turn to the Gospel of John, written 10 to 20 years later than Matthew, the gospel writer is so uncomfortable with the notion that Jesus would be baptized, that he glosses over the event and never states that

Jesus was actually in the water. The gospel shifts the focus to God's Spirit descending on him. And therein lies the key to our understanding of baptism. In the baptism of Jesus, the gospel writers did not discern God talking about sin, but rather love. "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

God is not the Austere Judge eager to send sinners to hell, but the Cosmic Lover who seeks to love the hell out of us. Baptism is a ritual of the church in which we declare that each of us is a son or daughter of God and there is nothing that can sever God's love for us.

Henry Nouwen says that there is a voice deep within all of us that says, "You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter. I love you with an everlasting love... You belong to Me and I belong to you. Trust that you are the beloved. That is who you truly are."

Do you honestly believe that about yourself?

All of us have voices rattling deep within us. The voices originate from our parents, former teachers, siblings, our culture and more. Some have a dark voice inside that asks, "Can't you ever do anything right?" Some have a dismissive voice that says, "You're not smart enough." Some have a cruel voice that says, "You'll never be a success." "You're not attractive."

Today Shannon Kershner is a Presbyterian minister, but she remembers when she was fifteen and in the midst of adolescent turmoil. Her face was breaking out, her emotions were all over the place, and the mean kids at school were doing their best to destroy her self-image. In the midst of that soul-crushing struggle, her parents challenged her. She had been baptized as a baby, and now it was time to remember what it meant. Her mother said, 'Every time you wash your face at night and rinse it with the water, I want you to say 'I am God's beloved. I am baptized.' Do it three times every night before you go to sleep.' So, she did. 'I am God's beloved. I am baptized.' 'I am God's beloved. I am baptized.'"<sup>1</sup> Everyone please repeat after me: "I am God's beloved. I am baptized."

At first, Shannon felt awkward, maybe even silly, repeating this mantra. It probably took more than a couple of weeks before it became a nighttime habit. But eventually, it became less awkward.

She says "the extra rinsing did not clear up her skin or insure that her emotions were always stable. It did not prevent the voices of the mean ones from slipping into her mind occasionally. However, as a result of that tangible act of reaffirmation and remembrance, she had one beautiful moment at the end of each day when she remembered who she really is. She is God's beloved. Hearing that voice of divine blessing each day gave her the courage to keep going and the trust that life would not always feel so difficult. And it changed her."<sup>2</sup>

What would happen to you if you reminded yourself each evening that you are God's beloved? Would it rinse away some of the other voices that tell you otherwise?

Further, how would it alter the way you view others and the way you *treat* others? Baptism not only declares who we are; it is also a commission of whom God calls us to become.

When Jesus stepped out of the cool waters of the Jordan River, he stepped onto new ground. God anointed him, adopted him, and commissioned him. Commissioned him for what? Did Jesus fully grasp God's plan for him? Doubtful. Jesus made a commitment at that moment to follow God, but I doubt he could envision precisely where the path would take him.

In the days ahead, the path God had in mind for Jesus would begin to emerge, but not so much the precise details as the broad outline; not so much the destination as the direction.

Would he be able to trust God's guidance? Would he possess the conviction to tackle the daily challenges?

The same is true for us. When we are baptized, God declares, "You are my beloved child." But that's not the extent of it. Our baptism is also a calling to a new way of living. We are to pattern our life after the life of Jesus – a life intent on loving others.

Are you open to adventure, or are you steadfastly committed only to what is familiar? How many times a week do you close the door on a new opportunity because it is unfamiliar territory?

Fear of the unknown holds us in check. Therapists are constantly frustrated by clients who refuse to change a destructive behavior for no other reason than it is the behavior to which they have become accustomed.

The therapist can envision a new world opening and a life of greater satisfaction, but the client continually recoils from challenges to live anew, moaning instead for *outward* circumstances to change, rather than taking the initiative embarking on a new path.

When you know with certainty that God loves you and wants the best for you; when you know that God does not seek to limit your life, but to broaden it; you will increasingly pursue the path of Jesus because it can bring so much satisfaction.

God's desire is to love you. You are a beloved child of God. How would your life become richer and more beautiful if you took that message to heart and then loved God back?

#### NOTES:

1. Shannon Kershner, "Epiphany Gifts," January 10, 2016.
2. Ibid.