



Sermon Preached by Greg Jones  
"The Beloved"  
January 10, 2010  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

If you have ever played golf, you know about a mulligan. It's the opportunity to take a second shot if your first one has gone awry. When I was a child, we called it a do-over. If you struck out or missed an easy basket, or played the wrong notes on the piano, you would beg for a do-over, and hope the other person would give you a second chance.

As we grow older, we find there are moments in life when we wish for a mulligan. Have you ever blown up in anger and spewed ugly words you wish you could retrieve? Perhaps you did not tell the truth and you were caught in a lie. Maybe you cheated someone. Or you regret not being more generous in helping someone who really needed you. All of us make mistakes. We do things we should not do, and we fail to do things we should do.

How do you handle personal failures when a do-over is not possible? Do you bury them? Do you make excuses? Do you try to forget them? Do you attempt to diminish them by comparing your mistakes with far worse ones made by others? Or, are you able to admit your wrong doing?

Today is Baptism of our Lord Sunday when we read a gospel account of the baptism of Jesus. It is a time to ponder the day that Jesus stepped into the Jordan River, and also to reflect on the significance of our own baptism.

In November, when 18 of us from Westminster took a spiritual pilgrimage to the Holy Land, we visited the Jordan River late one afternoon as the sun was setting. It was a special moment for most of us, but not because the Jordan is an impressive river. It is small by all standards. In most places, the Jordan is so narrow that you can easily stand on one bank and toss a stone to the opposite side. The Jordan's deepest point is 17 feet, but there are many places where you can wade across it without getting your chest wet. But that's not possible today. Much of the river is inaccessible because it is the heavily patrolled international border between Israel and Jordan. What makes the river exceptional in the minds of Christians is that this is where Jesus was baptized.

The gospels tell us that John the Baptist was out in the wilderness by the Jordan River preaching fiery sermons that challenged people to repent. What do you suppose persuaded people to trudge down to the river to hear that message? To hear that their lives were a mess? I think it was because he was offering them a mulligan. He was telling them that it was possible to make a new beginning

When she was in her thirties, artist Georgia O’Keeffe married a successful photographer and moved from Texas to New York City. One night shortly after making the move, O’Keeffe gathered up most of her paintings and threw them in the trash. After canning her artwork, she went out to dinner with her husband. As they returned to their apartment, they found her paintings blown all over the street and sidewalk. They did not even break stride. They simply marched inside their apartment building and left the paintings to the mercy of the weather and any passerby who wanted them. This was a critical event in O’Keeffe’s life. She turned a corner and went in a new direction with her painting. She put away her old ways in order to make a fresh start.<sup>1</sup>

The waters of baptism remind us that there are times when we need to make a fresh start. We need to have the courage to take stock of where we are and to make a new beginning. We are only baptized once, but the sacrament reminds us that there are many times throughout our lives when we need a spiritual scrubbing. God forgives us again and again, always with an eye to transforming us into a more fulfilled person who is heading in the right direction.

This brings us to the prickly question posed by this passage. If one of the significant meanings of baptism has to do with forgiveness, then why did Jesus need to be baptized? The Gospel of Matthew recognizes this dilemma and says that John the Baptist tried to prevent Jesus from stepping into the waters of the Jordan, but Jesus insisted. Our reading from Luke does not record John’s hesitancy, but points out that Jesus was baptized at the same time that *all* the people were baptized. Luke seems to be laying the groundwork for what becomes an essential theme of his gospel: Jesus stands in solidarity with all of humanity. He separates himself from no one.

John the Baptist may have worried that if Jesus was baptized along with everyone else, some eyebrows might rise. People might have begun whispering about what hidden sin Jesus needed to confess. But when Jesus presented himself for baptism it was not due to his sin. It was a declaration of his intention to stand by us in all situations. He was not concerned about his reputation; he was focused on our reconciliation.

And that is a key understanding of baptism in the church today. In addition to cleansing us and offering us a second chance; baptism is a reminder that God loves us deeply.

Biblical scholar David Bartlett tells about what happened in the family of two of his good friends. The couple has one biological child named Sam, and they have adopted four other children. At an appropriate age, the parents sat down with each adopted child and explained how he or she was chosen and how deeply he or she is cherished and loved. After the youngest child, Mark, heard the wonderful story of how his parents had chosen him and how they wanted him and how deeply they loved him and were grateful for him—and how his arrival in the family was different from Sam’s, the biological son, little Mark said, “Gosh, this is so wonderful! Can’t we adopt Sam, too?”<sup>2</sup>

When Jesus was baptized, God said, “You are my son, the Beloved.” And then, as the days unfolded, and Jesus launched his ministry, he declared that God’s love and acceptance was not something reserved for him alone. It is extended to all.

Is it any wonder why the sacrament of baptism became such an essential element of the church? Whenever we baptize an infant or an adult, we perform a ritual that reminds us that we have been claimed by God as a beloved child. Baptism marks us as one whom God loves and wants and chooses.

It is also important for us to note *when* Jesus was baptized. It was at the inception of his ministry. Before he had preached his first sermon, before he had healed anyone, before he had

spoken a single parable, Jesus was baptized and God called him “the Beloved.” His baptism was not the culmination of his work; it was the event that launched his ministry. It was the beginning point of his life’s vocation.

When Archbishop Desmond Tutu was a young pastor, he was charged with teaching catechism classes to a group of 13 year-olds. On a New Testament quiz, he included the question, “What did the voice from heaven say at Jesus’ baptism?” One of the boys in the class wrote: “You are the Son of God, now act like it!” I’m confident the archbishop gave him an “A”!<sup>3</sup>

If Jesus’ baptism is in some way a commissioning, a sendoff into ministry, we should think of ours in the same way. In baptism, we are commissioned to be followers of Christ and to spread his love throughout the world.

Author Chaim Potok knew from a young age that he wanted to be a writer, but on the day he left for college, his mother pulled him aside and said, “I know you want to be a writer, but I have a better idea. You’re very bright, study to become a brain surgeon.”

He replied, “No thanks, Mom. I want to be a writer.” When he returned home after his first semester, his mother pulled him off alone and said, “Son, I know you want to be a writer, but listen to your mother. Become a brain surgeon. You will keep people from dying and you will make a lot of money.” Again, he replied, “No Mom. I’m going to be a writer.”

This conversation went on throughout his college years until his final year. In desperation, his mother said, “You’re wasting your time! Be a brain surgeon. You’ll keep a lot of people from dying and you’ll never be short of money.”

He looked his mother directly in the eyes, and said respectfully, but firmly, “Mother, I do not want to simply keep people from dying. I want to show them how to live! That is why I’m going to become a writer.”<sup>4</sup>

If you have been baptized, God summons you to a distinct way of living. What in you is broken? What are you hiding? Is there someone you need to forgive? God is calling you to a life that is rich and joyful, satisfying and hopeful. Length of life is not the objective; depth of life is the goal.

## NOTES

1. From *Georgia O’Keeffe and the Eros of Place*, Cited by Mac Schafer.
2. John M. Buchanan, “The Great Reversal,” June 24, 2001.
3. Christopher Henry, “On Being Human,” January 11, 2009
4. Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Explanation in Vocational Holiness*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1992), p.46.