



Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

January 8, 2017

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 43:1-7

Gospel Lesson

Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism of Jesus

The young son of a Baptist minister was in church one morning when he saw for the first time baptism by immersion. He was greatly interested in it, and the next morning proceeded to baptize ... you guessed it ... his three cats in the bathtub.

The youngest kitten bore it very well, and so did the younger cat, but the old family tomcat rebelled.

The old feline struggled with the boy, clawed and tore his skin, and finally got away. With considerable effort the boy caught the old tom again and proceeded with the "ceremony."

But the cat acted worse than ever, clawing and spitting, and scratching the boy's face.

Finally, after barely getting the cat splattered with any water, he dropped him on the floor and said, "Fine, be a Methodist if you want to!"

Someone once remarked that most everyone goes to church at least three times-when they're hatched, matched, and snatched. Well, this morning's gospel lesson focuses on the "hatched" stage of life: baptism.

And water has been an essential part of this process. One of the rituals to regain spiritual cleanliness was to be immersed in water. The *mikvah* [show picture] was an important part of the religious life of Jews then and remains so today. The faithful enter the waters aware of their separation from the holiness of God due to the sin in their lives, and emerge renewed, refreshed and spiritually clean.

The water serves as a reminder of how God is always ready to forgive when we repent of our sins. Faithful Jews still use the *mikvah* today to prepare for worship, a holy day or their wedding.

In this tradition, but in a new way and with a new message, John immersed people in the Jordan River for the forgiveness of their sins. The Greek word for "immerse" is *baptizo*, from which we get our word "baptism."

[Type here]

John came to call people to repentance, asking them to prepare for the kingdom of God. It is no wonder, then, that he is so surprised when Jesus presents himself for baptism

This seems strange and in our Gospel lesson John remarks about this -- what need would there be for Jesus, the sinless one, to be ritually cleansed? And, in fact, John the Baptist tried to argue just that point with him -- but to no avail.

So, why was Jesus there? He was there to give us a model to follow him into the waters of repentance, forgiveness and new life. More importantly, Jesus came to identify fully with us. To get into the muck and mud of our lives and walk with us. Mark Busse of Reardon, Washington, despite his cancer, was a very lucky young man - no – not lucky, blessed. He was blessed because he had the best kind of friends anyone can have - for they, although they were not sick, although they had no reason in the world. They shaved their heads so they could experience some of what Mark was going through

They identified with him. They walked in his shoes. They showed him that he was not alone. They gave to him a sign which he could treasure, a sign that made real to him and to others their love for him. In a much larger way, this is what Jesus did in coming to the Jordan river that day, he let us know through this sacred act that when we pass through the waters, as Isaiah wrote, the waters of hurt, of doubt, of regret, that he is with us. As Isaiah wrote, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and flame shall not consume you.” And so Jesus entered the water, not because he needed to, but because out of a greater love he wanted to – to be one with us, one of us, the one walking with us forever.

And as Jesus came up out of the water, our reading says that the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

In other words, Jesus is claimed and given an identity as a child of God. He is blessed and beloved. But the deeper significance is when we hear Paul write to the church in Galatia, “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized in Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are in Christ Jesus” Through our baptism we are

[Type here]

claimed as a child of God, as a person of extreme worth. More than that, we are connected to one another through the body of Christ and to the greater love of God that shows no distinction, sees no label, looks beyond anything outward and superficial to connect with our hearts and souls.

One of the most powerful baptisms, I participated in was in my student appointment. We had a young girl, who was about 14, that lived next door to the church. Her family were not members, but whenever we did activities outside and she was outside we would invite her. At first, she said no. But then one day, she walked over on her own. Her name was Julie and she fit in right away and had this wonderful smile and laugh and sense of humor. At first, she joined us outside and then came to the youth group and then she came to worship. However, she always came alone. She didn't want to talk about it, so we just kept welcoming her. And then, after we did a baptism, which was my first one, she hung around after the service and surprised me when she asked how someone gets baptized and what it means and would we let her do it. So, we talked and I found out that her older sister had died when she was 16 from a brain aneurysm. Her parents never recovered from the loss. They were crushed by the grief, angry at God, and I came to find out they weren't all that thrilled that she was coming across to church. I know that her parents loved her in their own way, but it was a love given from broken hearts. Behind the smile and her laugh, I realized Julie was a lonely young woman

On the day of her baptism, although her parents agreed to it, they told her it was too painful to come, so I and the senior pastor moved the baptism font into the center of the sanctuary and when it came time to baptize her instead of just one or two people standing with her the entire congregation stood and formed a human chain with hands all over her spreading out through the sanctuary. And since she was a little older and I wasn't all that experienced I used a lot of water, so it was kind of like full immersion. And as she looked up, the look on her face was of pure joy and peace, and it was wet not just from the water but from her tears as she whispered, "I am filled with so much love"

That is what it means to be claimed as a child of God, child of love, child of grace, child of joy. Because, our baptism is not something that happens to us. It is something that happens through us, as we are filled up with love and connected to one another as the body of Christ

[Type here]

For we are claimed and connected but also commissioned and called to ministry. Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his public ministry. In this time, we heard in our scripture how the Spirit of God descended like a dove and filled with the Holy Spirit Jesus began his ministry to proclaim the kingdom of God, offer healing and hope, and bring to everyone who wants it forgiveness and new life through his death and resurrection.

So, that all who follow in his name would realize that they now have a part in his ministry as his body and his church. The Holy Spirit is at work in us, opening our eyes and hands and hearts to be in mission and ministry. To offer healing and hope, grace and new life as we live out our baptism. So often we see the hurts and pains of this world and wonder where is God? The better question is: Where are we? For scripture is clear that God works by sending people – God sent Moses out to free the Hebrews, God sent the prophets out to warn the people, God sent the disciples out to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, let the oppressed go free, and God has commissioned and called each one of us through our baptism to be his hands and heart and feet to go out and proclaim our faith, make God's love real, care for the homeless in our county, the hungry in our midst, bring coats those who are cold, reach out to those who are lonely and hurting and welcome them in, to pray with those in need, and share what our faith means to those who are seeking.

On this day, as we reaffirm and remember our baptism let us reaffirm that we are claimed as children of God, connected to a greater love in the body of Christ and we are all commissioned and called to go out in the name of this greater love and hope.

The story is told of a pastor's words to a baby shortly after he had baptized her. No doubt, the minister was speaking as much to the congregation as to the infant. "Little sister, by this act of baptism, we welcome you to a journey that will take your whole life. This isn't the end. It's the beginning of God's involvement in your life. What God will make of you, we know not. Where God will take you, surprise you, we cannot say. This we do know and this we say -- God is with you." And God will be with us as we live out our baptism. Amen.