

Matthew 3:13-17

13Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 15But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. 16And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17And a voice from heaven said, **“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”**

Today, we are blessed to have been part of the baptism of Damion and Amie, along with their public profession of faith and uniting with our church. With those images before us, let us turn to today’s text, which features Jesus’ baptism by John, and remember our own baptisms or stories of them.

The Baptism of Jesus is one of those very significant events; it is so essential that it is found in all four gospels.

This is Jesus’ first appearance in the gospel as an adult. He has traveled a significant distance to come to John and to perform his first public act, presenting and submitting himself to John for baptism. Instead of coming to power, he comes in humble obedience to God.

John is reluctant to baptize Jesus because Jesus is greater than he is, and he believes that Jesus is the one who should baptize him. Indeed, that feeds into the question of why Jesus needed to be baptized in the first place. Tradition holds he was without sin, and since John’s baptism was one of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, Jesus did not need it. He did not need to repent, but we do.

Jesus turns aside John’s comment and says, “You must baptize me to fulfill all righteousness.” That somewhat cryptic reply means that you must do this for me because it is part of God’s intent for me. It is what God wants. And Jesus trusts God’s plan for him.

It is like the story of Abraham, in Genesis 12, when God told Abraham to trust God and leave his home with his family to a new land God would give him, so that through Abraham the world would be blessed. As Genesis 15:6 says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Without having all the details, Abraham trusts God. That would be very hard for most of us.

The heart of righteousness is the obedient, trusting of God, and following God’s lead. Jesus trusts in God’s plan that John is to baptize him. Matthew doesn’t really explain it in any more detail. Just like the crucifixion, it is part of God’s plan, no why or how or what for. Jesus does this in trusting obedience to God. It is this trust that opens the door for us to a relationship with God. Our relationship with God is built on trust. It is not that Jesus needs to be baptized; it is God’s will that it be so. And so, Jesus does it.

Jesus trusts God and faithfully obeys.

Obedience to God’s will seems to be somewhat out of fashion. Just hold a copy of the Ten Commandments up against a modern newscast, and we see that obedience to God is not very fashionable. Indeed, we have such an independent streak that doing what God requires feels foreign; no one can tell me what to do, think, or say. And yet, part of the Christian Faith is that God does tell us both who we are and what we are to do. How can we know what to do and be? Look to Jesus.

God requires trusting obedience from us. Sure, God is pure forgiveness, love, and mercy, but that forgiveness, mercy, and love to be truly received by us involves repentance, which is a reorienting of mind, heart, soul, and whole self toward God and seeking a relationship where we desire to know and do God's will and believe it is what is best for us.

So, what does doing God's will look like? What is faithful obedience?

What does God require of us? Micah 6:8 tells us:

⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you?
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

And Matt 22:37-39 adds the heart of the law we are to obey: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

That's more than enough to start with. It is the work of a lifetime, and we know, sometimes it is hard to do.

In today's world, as Carey Nieuhoff, a pastor and church leadership specialist, reminds us, many of us are already reoriented or at risk of being changed by social media and 24/7 news. Much of our social media is driven by algorithms that tend to feed us more of the same, reinforcing what we already think, do, and say. And it is filled with rage bait, a new word I learned, meaning content intended solely to anger us and trigger a response.

So, daily, we are being shaped not only by our devotional, scriptural, and church lives but also by a bombardment of what we already think and believe and by things that anger us. With the advent of AI-generated media, determining the truth is almost impossible. The old joke line, "I saw it on the internet; it must be true", has been replaced by the dire warning, "I saw it on the internet; it must be false."

Rather than letting our faith interpret our culture, we often let culture interpret our faith. Social media shapes and forms us in less-than-wholesome ways. And faithful obedience to God gets lost. Run this as a test on yourself. How is social media telling me what I want to hear and fear? How am I being shaped by an algorithm? That is why it is essential to remember our baptism.

Our baptism reminds us of our need to repent and reorient our life's path to one that is faithfully obedient to God. Jesus does this by example; even though he doesn't need to repent or confess sin, he sets an example of trusting obedience because God knows we need him to set just such an example. God gives us a way to live, trusting obedience, and Jesus undergoes baptism to show us the way to that obedience and a life of meaning. Good words and bible verses are not enough. Good deeds and faithful living give evidence of the good words and bible verses. We must **be** faithful and **live** faithfully. Our lives are to be faithful and do things in humble, trusting obedience to God.

Jesus' baptism also teaches us another lesson. Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, the chosen one, and yet he presents himself in humility, giving us the first example of what our lives are to be like. Indeed, his first act is one of humility. He submits himself to John for baptism.

When I was baptized in 1970, I think I remember being asked three questions. And at the time, I was a little different from our church community at Gracewood Presbyterian Church. I had long hair and all that went with it. I

was the epitome of counter-cultural, or so I thought; I was going to show everyone that I could answer the questions loud and proud. I did so for the first question, which went something like, “Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?”

“I do,” I spoke up, and then the power of the spirit took over, and I was unable to be loud and proud. I felt a deep sense of humility and could barely speak, answering the other two questions with a mumbled “I do.”

In answering, I bound myself to Jesus as Lord, though I did not know all that entailed at the time. The sense of humility has helped me understand that Jesus is not a power-hungry narcissistic megalomaniac; he came in humility to serve God and humanity. Now that is truly countercultural, not the clothes or length of one’s hair.

Jesus uses all his power and glory in the service of God and of humankind. He comes to save and serve. As Matthew 20:28 says, “just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” This picks up the twin theme of obedience and humble service.

The first thing Jesus does after he is baptized is go into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan, who wants Jesus to use and display his powers self-servingly. Satan wants him to express devotion to him, but Jesus refuses Satan. And he continues to declare his dependence on God. This is one way he tells us that life is not all about power and glory, but about humble, loving, faithful obedience to God. And that is a timeless lesson.

And there is another vital aspect for us in this. John’s baptism expresses Jesus’ solidarity with us. Jesus is declaring that he is one with us. And that just doesn’t mean in a personal way, true. Jesus is bound to you and me in a personal way, but also to all people in the world in which we live. All of us. Jesus, the son of God, binds himself to all of us. There was an old song by Joan Osbourn, “What if God was one of us”, and here the lyric could be sung “God is one with us.”

The importance of this unity is revealed when Jesus emerges from the water. I imagine him arising out of the water as the Spirit descends on him, and God declares, “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” This blessing is not just for Jesus; it is for everyone to hear. God speaks that Jesus is God’s beloved, and through his solidarity with us, so are we. We are also God’s beloved. We are given a new name, a baptismal name, **and that is beloved.** We are named beloved and claimed by God in baptism. This is vital.

Most of us have been called names in life and labeled by others, and sometimes those names stick with us, giving us an identity that haunts us for the rest of our lives. I remember one such label on a report card: unsatisfactory. In grade school, I received many of them under the heading “Practices self-control”. I wasn’t sure what that meant, except that I wasn’t a good kid. And in junior high, in the report period after my father’s death, I received two unsatisfactorys, and that kept me off the honor roll. I admit I deserved them, but my father had just died, and my whole world was out of control. There was no grace or mercy there, but now, we have a new name, a new label, **we are God’s beloved**, God is well pleased with us. This helps us get past some of those old names and labels that we have lived with. We can overcome them even though they’re as powerful as they are. God is more powerful. What names and labels do you need to get past?

Through Jesus, we all have the label “God’s beloved”, and God is well pleased with us. It may take some time for that to sink in and for you to believe it, but it is true.

Beloved is our name, and this is what I try to remind us of each week with the benediction: God loves you, adores you, treasures you, and you are held in God's very heart. Beloved child is not just Jesus' identity; it is ours as well. We are God's beloved and are called to live in unity with each other.

Jesus has declared his faithful obedience to God and his unity with us; we belong to God.

God is calling us through baptism that, like Jesus, this baptism is his commissioning for ministry. In our baptism, even as infants, and sealed by our confirmation, we are commissioned for ministry as individuals and as a community. We don't have to do everything, but we all can do something.

We need to remember that our baptism is the commissioning of us to do that something, sometimes that one thing we can do. Loving God and Neighbor takes many shapes and forms, and since we are God's beloved, faithful, obedient people, and through Jesus, God has declared we are beloved Children of God with whom God is well pleased. We are empowered to live in that humble, faithful, obedient love. God loves us, believe the Good News.