

## God's Own

by The Rev. Heather Tunney, Associate Pastor of East Liberty Presbyterian Church

*Matthew 3:13-17*

*Presented at East Liberty Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA  
January 13, 2008*

Leave it to John the Baptist to point out the elephant in the room. Leave it to this renegade prophet to call to everyone's attention the one thing that just doesn't seem right about this whole story – the one thing that was an actual embarrassment for the early church. In the few short verses of our scripture lesson for today, John points out to Jesus that something seems wrong with this picture – that really *he, John*, should *not* be the one to baptize Jesus. As a matter of fact, Jesus, God's beloved son, does not really *need* John's baptism of repentance at all. There is something out of order about Jesus' request, and John, not mincing words, points that out to Jesus – much like Peter will object to Jesus' washing of the disciples feet in John's gospel.

Perhaps John is concerned that this baptism will leave room for questions about Jesus. Maybe he is worried about what others might say – maybe he's afraid that others will question why if Jesus is the one about whom John has been speaking if *he* needs a baptism of repentance. Maybe John is worried about his own reputation – he said that one will come whose sandals he is not fit to tie...and yet he goes on to baptize this same one of whom he claims subordination and humility.

Regardless of John's motives, his objection raises a key question of this text. The question raised is a simple one: "*Why?*" *Why* should John baptize the one who should be baptizing him? *Why* should John baptize one who does not really need this baptism? And those of us on this side of the story, those of us sitting in church worshipping and praising the Jesus we know as messiah, as redeemer, as holy, as perfectly loving – we may ask this same question of Jesus: "*Why?*"

Jesus' reply is simple enough: "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus says: It is the right thing to do. This act will serve to fulfill God's plan. God has required this of us, and so we should follow suit. We need to do this. But like a three-year-old who knows that every answer is a doorway to another question, we can't help but ask: Ok, but *Why?*

To get to the heart of this matter, we must turn to what we have before us – to the 5 verses of this narrative. One answer may lie in John's question itself. The solution to our question may be found in the uncomfortable problem John identifies in the first place: ***Jesus' baptism identifies Jesus with sinners.*** Through this baptism, Jesus identifies himself with those whose brokenness and need for wholeness have driven them to the Jordan. Through his baptism, Jesus exercises humility and receives the mark of a repentant sinner. Although this may seem sketchy to John and make some biblical interpreters nervous, there is something that seems *appropriate* about the fact that Jesus should begin his public ministry with an act of humility that identifies Jesus with those who he came to save. Especially as we read this story just one week after our Epiphany celebration, when the joy of the promise of the incarnation is fresh in our minds, let us remember that Jesus himself is an embodiment of God's solidarity with humankind. How fitting, then, that he should succumb to an act that symbolizes the depth of this solidarity.

Yet, even as Jesus is identified with sinful humanity, the story of Jesus' baptism likewise identifies him with the Divine. The heavens open, the Spirit descends like a dove, and the voice of God declares, '*This* is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" In this moment of baptism, Jesus is also elevated – identified as God's Son, wholly beloved, delightful to God. Through this public act of baptism, Jesus' identity is publicly proclaimed. Jesus identifies fully with the sinners he has come to save and identifies fully as a person of the triune Godhead.

Jesus' baptism guides our understanding of the sacrament of baptism that we celebrate as a people of faith. Baptism is for us a sign and seal of Jesus' solidarity with

humankind in all times and places. Jesus doesn't just stand with the sinners at the Jordan – Jesus stands with and for us, *here and now*. As we celebrate baptism we remember just how thoroughly Jesus' solidarity with us has freed us from sin and death. But we must also remember that the purpose of baptism isn't to serve as a free ticket into heaven, a get-out-of-hell free card. Nor is baptism to be used to draw invisible lines in the sand that try to identify who is in the in-crowd, who is officially saved. Rather our baptism is a means of *God's grace* – a visible sign of the invisible reality of the salvation that is ours through Jesus Christ. Through baptism we profess that in Christ we have died to sin and been resurrected to new life. This new life is not something that we have earned, but it is a free gift that is ours because of Jesus' solidarity to us in his life, death, and resurrection.

Through baptism we are also reminded of the fullness of our identity – an identity that is often rendered incomplete when we get fixated on our sinfulness. ***We too are God's beloved children.*** ***We*** are heirs of God's kingdom, cherished and called out to participate in God's divine purpose for all of creation. See, I think it is important for us to hang on this point for a minute, because it is key to our identity as believers and as a church. *We are God's children, beloved and called to participate in God's mission in this world.*

Now don't get me wrong – we *are* sinful. And it is important for us to examine our own consciences as individuals and as a church, and we are called to repent and strive to change our ways.

But it is also true that society is quick to point out fault – just think of the popularity of tabloid press in our own culture if you doubt it. And it is also true that we are quick to find fault in ourselves. It is so much easier for us to believe a word of criticism rather than an honest compliment. It is so much easier for us to dwell on what we wish we could change in ourselves than to see the gifts that are there. It is so much easier to look in the mirror and see the 5 pounds that we just can't get rid of, to see the crookedness of our teeth, to see the bags under our eyes than to stand face to face with our unique beauty. And it is easier to lie in bed at night and worry about

what we could have said better in the face of a conflict, or what we could have done better at work than to see how God has equipped us, even in our weakness, to be agents of love and healing in our world. Our experience of our own imperfections can be paralyzing. It can hold us captive in a vicious cycle of repeat offending when we fail to see the forest through the trees – when we see only half of who we are in this life and miss the point about who it is God is calling us to be.

That is why this passage is so important to us – that is why our sacrament of baptism is so important to us. Through baptism, we remember that we are God's own children. In spite of ourselves and because of ourselves we are God's own, wholly loved and graciously accepted through the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Baptism also reminds us of the life to which we are called. The gospel reading for today is paired with our OT lesson from Isaiah. This pairing reminds us that our identity as God's children is rooted in a call to servanthood. And embedded in this call is the imperative to serve as agents of God's justice in this world – to be a light to all nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to set prisoners free. God's covenant and God's call require a faithful pursuit of justice – of justice that guides, that heals and that frees.

I can't remember my baptism. I was 6 weeks old, dressed in a white gown, cradled in the arms of my godmother, my Aunt Mary Lou. I am reminded of my baptism through fading photographs of family standing before a font, holding me in their arms. It amazes me that I am now older than both of my parents were at the time of my baptism. It is hard to look in the mirror sometimes and remember that I am that child in the photographs, marked by a promise whose utterance I don't even remember.

But that promise has marked my life. Somehow, through God's grace, the promises of my parents and the promises of God that were exchanged on that cold January day shaped me. And so although I cannot remember the weather that day (though I'm told it snowed), nor the meal served that evening, nor the songs sung on the day of my baptism, I can

remember....the grace of baptism, the love of baptism, the promise of baptism.

Friends....remember. Remember that God has claimed you. And in fact, baptized or not, you are God's beloved children, created with purpose, held in a promise, called to serve. Let us live into our baptismal identity – mindful of God's love for us and humbled by God's call.

Amen.

Copyright 2008 – The Rev. Heather Tunney