

Marks of a Christian: 1. Baptized

Jan. 9, 2005

Matthew 3:13-17, 42:1-9

He was an independent fellow--he didn't mind refusing people. And here, for the second time, he was refusing to baptize. It was easy to deny the Pharisees and Sadduces--they didn't really come to repent of their sins. They thought they were too good for that. So he turned them down flat. And now here was Jesus, standing before him, asking to be baptized. He didn't want to do it--it was all wrong. He was trying to get people to repent, to turn around, to reject their sinful ways, so that they'd be ready to listen to the Messiah. And here the Messiah was, standing right in front of him, wanting to be baptized himself.

"No, Lord," John said, "You should be baptizing me." But Jesus insisted. And so it was done. And as they came up out of the river, the water glistening on their skin and dripping from their clothes, John saw the dove and heard the voice. "This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

What a moment! What a beginning for Jesus' ministry! What an affirmation of his calling!

We don't think much about baptism, do we? We think a lot more about communion. After all, we celebrate communion once a month. But we're baptized only once, and for most of us that was done a long time ago. We tend to think of it as something that happened in the past. It's over and done with. Or is it?

We're going to see this morning that, while baptism happens to us only once, it is one of the marks of a Christian and its power and influence is with us all our lives. At the end of the service I'm going to ask you if you would like to come forward and renew your baptism. This will be a simple service. I'll ask you whether you renounce sin, I'll ask who your Lord and Savior is, and I'll ask if you intend to be Jesus disciple. Then the whole congregation will say the Lords' prayer. Finally, Jan or I will touch your forehead with oil. And we'll offer a prayer.

We need to be very clear, first, about the way Jesus' baptism is different from ours. John baptized people only as a sign of repentance. Our baptism

is that, and more.

But Jesus hadn't sinned. He didn't need to repent. Why then was he baptized?

He said to John, "You should baptize me because it fulfills all righteousness. Now what could that mean? Fulfilling all righteousness means fulfilling God's will. We could say, it's according to God's righteous plan. I like the way Eugene Peterson translates it in The Message. He has Jesus saying, "God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." Jesus was baptized in obedience to God's will for him and his life. He went down into the muddy water as a sign that he was identifying with us, joining with us sinful human beings. He was setting out to do whatever it took to convince us of God's love for us. In the Isaiah passage Jan read that God's son was to open the eyes of the blind and free prisoners from the dungeon. Jesus was setting out on a life, death and resurrection that would open our eyes and free us from the prison of sin. You could say that Jesus baptism and ours are complementary. In his baptism Jesus was identifying with us, becoming one with us, in our baptism we are accepting Jesus' gift of wholeness and freedom and becoming one with him.

Now let's look at some of the ways that our baptism is like his. First, just as Jesus was baptized in obedience to God, we, too, are baptized in obedience to God. In baptism we accept God's will and God's plan for us. I will even be bold enough say that God's work of putting things right comes together in our baptism as well. Once Jesus made this commitment--once we make this commitment--life can never be the same again. This decision affected Jesus every day of his life and it should affect us every day of our lives. I may have shared this prayer by Thomas Merton before. But it expresses the spirit of Christian obedience so well that I want to share it now.

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am

following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me through the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my peril alone.

Baptism, then is a sign of our obedience to God.

Second, as the Holy Spirit was present at Jesus baptism, so we are given the gift of the the Holy Spirit in our baptism. Jan read the text from Acts today. Right after Peter preached his sermon the Spirit came to the gentile Cornelius, and he was baptized. The Holy Spirit becomes our teacher and our source of power. I believe that at every instant of our lives the Spirit is present, calling us, evoking the best from us, including us in the creation of a better world. Certainly that seems to be the way the Spirit worked in Jesus' life. There may be moments when we, like Cornelius feel filled with the Spirit. You may remember a time, when you were singing a hymn or listening to a choir, or watching a sunset, when you felt very clearly the Spirit of God. Or there may have been a time when you were certain of the Spirit's leading--you knew for sure what God was calling you to do. There may be other times when you have to rely on the trusting obedience Merton prays about and you may have to say, with him , "you will lead me through the right road though I may know nothing about it." So because of our baptism, whether we recognize it or not, whether we feel it or not, the Spirit is at work in our lives.

Finally, Jesus' baptism was his commissioning service. The voice out of heaven announced the Son who serves. Jesus went on to become the kind of servant described in Isaiah, who brought forth justice, who opened the eyes of the blind and freed the prisoners. He has become a light to the nations. Our baptism is our commissioning service, too, we are to follow the path blazed by our lord. We may not know exactly what our life of obedience is to be, but we can know that it will be a life that works for justice and healing and freedom, just as our Lord's was. We can know that as he was a light, we can become little lights. I have a friend who is a nun. She told me that what she wanted, what she felt the Spirit calling her to do, was to teach. And she did teach, for many years. For many years she opened many little eyes. But then she got a phone call from her brother that her father was ill

and needed her. So she talked it over with her order and she was given permission to move from Wisconsin to California and she began caring for her dad. She was still able to teach for awhile. Then her dad died and her mother became ill. And after she died there was an uncle who needed her care. It wasn't the work she would have chosen. It wasn't glamorous. It was very ordinary. It took her away from her community. But it was the work the Holy Spirit had for her to do. She was a bringer of light to three people who needed her. What surprised me, as I heard her tell it, was her joy. Doing the work the spirit called her to do has given her a life of delight and joy. Well, brothers and sisters, we too have a lifetime of work and service ahead of us. We will be living out the implications of our baptism every day of our lives. We too, are to be about opening eyes, bringing justice, freeing captives, being a light to the nations.

A couple of years ago my brother and his wife, and his three daughters and their husbands made an interesting pilgrimage. They flew to Hawaii for a vacation together. While they were there they got all dressed up and went to a beautiful spot on a beach. There all four couples renewed their wedding vows. It was a special time, a time of recommitment, made richer by the years of love each couple had known and the love and memories they all shared. The renewal of our baptism can be like that. It can be a time to remember and be grateful that God has called us to be obedient and has given us the gift of the spirit and the gift of God's work to do. It can be a time to say, "I renew my commitment to you and my resolve to be your faithful servant."

Luther said we should begin every day remembering that we are baptized. When we feel the water on our faces in the morning, it should remind us of the waters of baptism. To do so is to enter each day with a renewed sense of ministry. Who will I meet today? How will my activities today be a ministry to others? How can I share God's love with others, in this community of faith and beyond?

Some of you may not remember your baptism--your parents may have brought you to God while you were still a baby. All the more reason to renew and reaffirm that commitment now.

And so, now, if you would like to renew your baptism, please come forward and join us here in front. Or, if coming forward is , you may raise your hand, and we will come to you.