

Follow Me

January 8, 2017

Matthew 3: 13-17

One of my favorite Christmas memories happened about three years ago, and while it is a story I've shared before I just love retelling it. It was the day after Christmas and we went down to visit our grandchildren and their parents.

Caitlyn, our oldest granddaughter who was four and a half, had just learned to ride her bike without training wheels. While we were there she wanted to go and practice, so we headed over to the local tennis court where the ground was flat and the space was fenced in. She wanted my help, so I would stand beside her and steady the bike as she began to pedal. She was only able to go a few feet before the bike would turn into the fence or she would lose her momentum. A common occurrence when learning to ride on your own. Like all beginning drivers, whether a bicycle or car, an important aspect of riding or driving is keeping your eyes looking ahead and not looking directly down in front of you. You need to keep your head up and look ahead, otherwise, you just run into things. Sensing this, I decided to run in front of Caitlyn to help her keep her head up and see where she was going. I ran ahead of her all the while saying "look at Papo! That's my grandfather name, "Follow Papo!" I was flapping my arms like a bird and making a general fool of myself, which is what grandparents do. But you know what? She followed and rode around the tennis court like a pro. It was a delightful and amazing moment

Today, Jesus has come to the river Jordan where we see John the Baptist baptizing with water for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus has come in part to say to us as well, "Follow me, keep your eyes looking forward, trust me and do what I do."

We are all familiar with the story. John has been baptizing and preaching and calling to anyone who would listen to turn their lives around. To repent and turn their old lives in for a Kingdom Life, as John Peterson says in his translation. That there is One to come who is greater than I and whose sandals I am not worthy to untie, One who will baptize you with fire and the Holy Spirit!

And this is where our story begins today with Jesus arriving at the river and it leaves us wondering why Jesus came to be baptized? What is unique about Matthew's telling of this event is that this is the only gospel where John and Jesus have a conversation about this. And Jesus tells him that he should do it! That this is an act of obedience to fulfill all righteousness, and in Matthew's Gospel Righteousness is a central theme and means acting in accordance with the will of God, to be obedient, as we heard over and over again in our gospel during the Christmas season with Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and Magi being obedient to following God's leading. Jesus knows he needs to do this.

It must have been a bit of a shock for John then, when he looked up and saw Jesus standing in line with all the people, all of us sinners! And yes, you are a sinner, so don't kid yourself about that. But Jesus who has no need of repentance or forgiveness of sin stands with us anyway.

He could have stood on the bank of the river and blessed folks as they came out soaking wet from the river saying, "How are you doing? So good to see you repenting this morning. God Bless You." He could have gone out to John and said "what up Cuz? I'll take it from here". But he didn't. He walked out into the water the

same way we have and was baptized. Why? Perhaps it is what came next that sheds more light on why he did it, for as he came out of the water, 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.” Perhaps for Jesus, this is one of those moments that even though he knew he was called by God to be the Messiah, he needed this moment...he needed to hear God’s voice...to be anointed in the waters of life...to both affirm and confirm that this was truly God’s call on him.

We see a similar experience on the mount of transfiguration where Jesus and Peter, James and John hear the voice of God again say “this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased,” just before Jesus begins the last days of his ministry and life as he walks into Jerusalem to his crucifixion. And just as Samuel anointed Saul and David as they began their kingship so John anoints Jesus with the water of life as he begins his.

We all want these experiences don’t we? To hear God’s voice, to be reminded as Jesus was, that we too are God’s beloved Daughters and Sons, His beloved children. And by our baptism with and in Jesus we too are called into ministry. That it is His voice we are listening for to affirm who we are and in the waters of baptism, we are claimed as his own.

A story I’ve shared before but one that really connects this text for me came from Pastor Patricia Calahan about a formerly homeless man named Mario who lived in a church shelter. “He had live on the streets of New York City for half of his life. He spent his sixtieth birthday with friends at a church dinner at the shelter. Several people at the dinner claimed that Mario did not appear to be sixty years old. Responding to this comment, Mario reached into his coat pocket to produce his birth certificate, which showed that he was indeed sixty years old.

Mario said, “Want to see my baptismal certificate?” His baptismal certificate showed that he was baptized as a baby at an Episcopal church on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. What a remarkable thing! Why would Mario have carried his baptismal certificate with him all these years as he wandered the streets of Manhattan? Perhaps it was a constant reminder that he belonged to God. Maybe it was his letter from God and God’s people that confirmed that he belonged to the family of God, that he was beloved in spite of the messages he must have received from others.”

A few summers ago, I was visiting my mother who lives in Michigan, and one evening she pulled out a box of letters that she wanted me to have. The letters were from my Grandfather which I’ll share at another time, but in the mix of letters she gave me my certificate of baptism! I had no idea that she had it or that I had been baptized as a child in the Presbyterian Church. It says I was baptized on April 10th 1955. I was two years old. I’m sure I was a perfect baby.

But this week as I’ve been thinking about this it occurred to me that 61 years ago, my parents and my grandparents, and I think, even my great-grandparents stood in that Presbyterian Church in Mason Michigan, which is still there by the way, and presented me to God. Signed and sealed. Long before I was even aware of it, they were placing me in God’s care and in his community. It got me to thinking that generations of families have stood, as many of us have stood, here at the font and made promises and confessions. There is a thread that goes a long way back, all the way back to this moment of promise with Jesus.

A beautiful baptismal hymn in the Glory to God hymnal which we will sing later at Newdale is called, *I Was There to Hear Your Borne Cry*, a hymn that speaks to God's presence in our lives long before we were even aware of it, and that continued presence throughout our entire lives, even when we wander away. The first verse goes like this and it is God who is singing.

*I was there to hear your borne cry;
I'll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized to see your life unfold.
I was there when you were but a child with a faith to suit you well;
In a blaze of light you wandered off to find where demons dwell."
I was there to hear your borne cry;
I'll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized to see your life unfold.*

So why did Jesus come to be baptized? He came to the river to show us the way. And to show us that he is with us, and for us, and before us, and behind us, the first fruit of what is to come. He discovers fully who he is and why he has come and isn't that what happens to us all as we come to the font. This fountain of life and light and are filled with the Spirit and hear our names, beloved children of God! And our lives of ministry and service begin.

Jesus came to the river to affirm who he was, and not to be forgiven of sin, but to hear God's claim on his life, his very human life, to be reminded and to remind us all that we are beloved. We are loved by God, deeply and eternally. And so Jesus runs in front of us, maybe even flapping his arms like a bird saying, "Follow Me! Follow Papo! Follow Abba! Keep your head up and your eyes open and your face lifted up and Follow Me!

As we begin this New Year, full of new beginnings and with surprising new opportunities in front of us for ministry and service let us, just like Jesus come to the water. Be reminded again of our names. Be reminded again, who we are and to whom we belong. To be obedient to God's calling in our lives. And I thought it would be timely and appropriate, and I know for myself, very necessary, to revisit and renew our baptismal vows. To remind us once again that we belong to God and that we are his beloved children and that we are called to serve and love His Kingdom.

So I invite you to join me as I lead you back to the water and the covenant of baptism so that you can once again make your vow to the Lord. For those reading the sermon today, the following comes from the Book of Common Worship.

Hear these words from Holy Scripture: (1 Cor. 12: 12-13, 27 & Eph. 4: 1-3)

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Profession of Faith

Sisters and brothers in Christ, our baptism is the sign and seal of our cleansing from sin, and of our being grafted into Christ. Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the power of sin was broken and God's kingdom entered our world. Through our baptism we were made citizens of God's kingdom, and freed from the bondage of sin. Let us celebrate that freedom and redemption through the renewal of the promises made at our baptism.

I ask you, therefore. Once again to reject sin, to profess your faith in Christ Jesus, and to confess the faith of the church, the faith in which we were baptized.

Renunciations:

Do you renounce all evil, and powers in the world which defy God's righteousness and love?

I renounce them.

Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God?

I renounce them.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior?

I do.

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love, to your life's end?

I will, with God's help.

With the whole church let us confess our faith using the Apostle's Creed.

(After the Creed)

Let us pray: Eternal and gracious God, we give you thanks. In countless ways you have revealed yourself in ages past, and have blessed us with signs of your grace. We praise you that through the waters of the sea you led your people Israel out of bondage, into freedom in the land of your promise. We praise you for sending Jesus your Son, who for us was baptized in the waters of the Jordan, and was anointed as the Christ by your Holy Spirit. Through the baptism of his death and resurrection you set us free from the bondage of sin and death, and give us cleansing and rebirth. We praise you for your Holy Spirit, who teaches us and leads us into all truth, filling us with a variety of gifts, that we might proclaim the gospel to all nations and serve you as a royal priesthood. We rejoice that you claimed us in our baptism, and that by your grace we are born anew. By your Holy Spirit renew us, that we may be empowered to do your will and continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be all glory and honor, now and forever. Amen.

The minister may place his hand into the water of the font, lift up some water, let it fall back into the font, and then make the sign of the cross over the people, while saying: "Remember your baptism and be thankful. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Amen.

At this time, I will invite all who so desire to come to the font and dip their hands in the water. They may make the sign of the cross on their foreheads or just touch the water and remember.