



A sermon preached by E. Scott Winnette
Heart's Playfulness - Matthew 3:13-17
January 12, 2020

"Will you Tyler take _____ ..." The officiant forgot his name. Wanting to cover, she asked the groom, "With what name were you baptized?" The groom, paused. But then with great confidence responded, "I was baptized in the name of Jesus Christ!" I'm sure they had a fun laugh. Today we remember Jesus was also baptized. God-come-closer; Immanuel was baptized.

As a Jew they called it his mikveh; he was being ritually cleansed in the River Jordan. In mikveh, in baptism humanity is cleansed of barriers, of obstacles between us and the Holy and of obstructions between us. The theologies of both rituals have been amended over centuries. Yet, the crux of the bathing is belonging. We belong to God, are beloved. Be enlightened; we belong; smile; we belong; play for we belong. Regardless of our community, our color, our gender, our belief or behavior – we are worthy of the love of God, called beloved. Celebrate, the splash of water covers all humanity, not just Jews, and not just Christians.

With anti-Semitism emerging, let us remember the power of baptism – we all belong. And let us remind how Jesus entered the River Jordan a Jew, and he emerged a Jew celebrating his connection to his people and his God. Yes, I am preaching to the choir here; but it needs to be said again and again in a world that can't shake anti-Semitism – Jesus was Jewish. Jesus was not American, not white, not evangelical, not Christian; he was a Jewish reformer.

Did John and Jesus ponder whether to invite their mother's Elizabeth and Mary and thus trigger a huge post-mikveh luncheon with aunts, uncles, cousins, green-bean casseroles, fried chicken and jello. Or did they elope-a-dip? In the Synoptic Gospels there is no mention of a party. Matthew is the only to add John's reluctance, "I should be baptized by you, and yet you

come to me?" The oldest Gospel, Mark, simply states John baptized Jesus. The second Gospel Luke, defines a mass baptism, "When all the people were being baptized..." All three emphasize God's heavenly appreciation of Jesus, "This is my Own, my Beloved, on whom my pleasure rests."

In 1976, during the American Bicentennial, John Edgerton published the book "Generations: An American Family." He traced the generations of the Ledford family in the hills of Kentucky. Burnham Ledford, born 1876, was alive. He remembered visiting his great-grandmother in 1881. She had been born in 1791, while George Washington was president; their two lives spanned 200 years of history. Burnham said they called her "Blind Granny," because she had been blind as long as anyone could remember. He remembered her sitting in a large chair. She took him into her lap, drew him up to her side, and felt his eyes, his nose, his chin, his whole face. Then she smiled, and said, "Yep. 'I can feel it. I know this boy. He's one of us.'"¹ Burnham Ledford never forgot who he was. In the same way, through our baptisms, God tells us who we are; affirms we belong, we are beloved and pleasant.

The stories of Jesus' baptism echo God's Creation pleasure in Genesis. God's Spirit separated and bound, made and ordered creation and called each stanza of matter "good." *God said, "This is my light, my beloved, I am well pleased. These are the waters, my beloved, I am well pleased. These are the sky, and the land, and plants, and seasons and sun, moon and stars, and water creatures and sky creatures and land creatures and human creatures and they are all good, my beloved, I am well pleased."* Our baptisms celebrate God's good creation, and us as part and parcel of the good.

In Eastern Orthodox tradition those who are baptized at the same font become siblings. Jesus along with all the other bare-footed hopefuls walked through the toe-muddy-river-bottom to be baptized; the same water tickled their heels, hips, and heads. Wading in with different genealogies, from dissimilar villages, with distinct dreams and wildly disparate desires; they soaked together and waded out with a sibling sameness.

Frederick Buechner wrote, "*No matter how fancy and metaphysical a doctrine sounds, it was a human experience first. The doctrine of the divinity of Christ, for instance. The place it began was not in the word processor of some fourth-century Greek theologian, but in the experience of basically untheological people who had known Jesus of Nazareth and found something happening to their lives that had never happened before.*"

Unless you can somehow participate yourself in the experience that lies behind a doctrine, simply to subscribe to it doesn't mean much. Sometimes, however, simply to subscribe to a doctrine is the first step toward experiencing the reality that lies behind it."² Collectively we subscribe to the Sacrament of Baptism. How do we experience it?

Reformer Martin Luther during moments of doubt recited his knowledge of his baptism, "I am baptized. I am baptized. I am baptized." In our moments of doubt in God, in our moments of doubt in self, in those moments when we feel we don't belong, we can recite to ourselves, "I am baptized. I am baptized. I am baptized." Or, "God calls me good, good, good."; "I belong. I belong. I belong."; "I am beloved, beloved, beloved." And likewise, when others disturb us we calm ourselves, "They are beloved, beloved, beloved."

¹ Adapted from a sermon called "Called by Name" A sermon on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 by The Reverend Dr. Thomas G. Long January 11, 2004.

² Frederick Buechner. A Baptism Sourcebook. Liturgy Training Publications. 1993. P23.

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells of visits with her Grandmother Lucy. Whenever she visited Grandmother Lucy, grace and play abounded. ...The meals were delicious always with a favorite dessert. ... But, the best part of these visits were the baths. Each night Grandma Lucy would draw a hot bath filled with suds, and with her big sponge she would polish Barbara's skin. Then, following the bath she would anoint her granddaughter's body with Jergen's lotion all the way down to the soles of her feet. ...Barbara writes: *"When Grandma Lucy was done, I knew that I was precious. I was absolutely convinced that I was loved and nothing has happened since to shake that conviction"*.

Amy Hempel wrote. *"Most of the time you don't hear it. A pulse is a thing that you feel. Even if you are somewhat quiet. Sometimes you hear it through the pillow at night. But I know there is a place where you can hear it even better than that. Here is what you do. Ease yourself into a tub of water, you ease yourself down. You lie back and wait for the ripples to smooth away. Then you take a deep breath, and slide your head under, and listen for the playfulness of your heart."*³

Renew your baptism, sink into the effervescent bubbling bath waters of well-being. Remember with playful delight we belong with each other. Celebrate the living waters of God's love splashing on all people and play away the pointless prejudices of our world. Amen.

³ Ibid. Amy Hempel. P7.