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**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**January 9, 2011**  
**Promise-Keeping**  
**Matthew 3:13-17**

My father gave my sisters and I quite an amazing Christmas present this year. Wrapped in colorful paper tucked inside a decorative box was a collection of DVDs, a color photo of my sisters and I adorning the cover of each case with the title printed on top: *"The story of us."* My father had compiled all of the home movies and videos from our childhood—from my birth through my youngest sister's graduation—and arranged them in sequential order, with chapter headings to mark each new event in the story of our childhood. Needless to say, we were overcome.

The first DVD included the story of my baptism that took place when I was about six weeks old. Aunt Mary Lou, my Godmother, dressed me in my baptismal gown. The video then shows the whole family walking out of the door to go to church—parents, grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles. And then is the footage of my baptism—the priest holding me over the font, pouring water over my head, my parents processing through the church holding me in their arms, the lighting of the Christ candle.

The story of Jesus' baptism doesn't begin with the nostalgia we assign to the stories of our own baptisms. In fact, the story of Jesus' baptism—particularly as Matthew tells it—is a bit troubling at first. A full-grown Jesus meets his cousin John at the Jordan and asks that he, too, might receive John's baptism for the forgiveness of sins. But before they head into the waters, John names the problem that jumps out to the rest of us: **That Jesus—God incarnate, the Messiah—should come to receive a baptism for the forgiveness of sins.** John does not want to do it. He does not want to baptize the one who he knows should be baptizing him. Standing with Jesus at the Jordan, John knows that he is unworthy to baptize Jesus as he has the droves of sinners who have come his way. Furthermore he knows that Jesus does not stand in need of baptism as the others have. Yet Jesus persists, insisting that this must happen in order to fulfill God's righteousness. And God is indeed pleased—the heavens open, the Spirit like a dove descends upon Jesus and a voice confirms what John knows is true: that Jesus is God's son, the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

It's a bit of a puzzle, isn't it? Why would Jesus insist on being baptized? He is, after all, without sin. And he, as part of the triune Godhead, is the very one to whose baptism points. Yet rather than standing by the riverside to meet sinners emerging from the waters, Jesus insists on getting in, on being baptized himself. It's puzzling in a practical sense too—for our practical sensibilities might lead us to believe that as Jesus prepares to set out in his public ministry that he should strive to set himself apart as one who was different from the others—as one who was worthy enough to be paid heed, as one to be followed. Instead, he joins the ranks with all the others and insists that John baptize him.

But see, this is how Jesus operates. Once again he reinforces for us the topsy-turvy teaching that the last will be first and the first will be last. The roles are reversed, for God has put on flesh and is dwelling among the people, as one of the people. Jesus' commitment to his ministry is so strong that he tells John that he *has* to be baptized—this is the path toward the fulfillment of all righteousness. He *needs* John's baptism before he can go on.

But Jesus' baptism isn't about freeing him from sin. Jesus' baptism isn't about his own repentance, or his own transformation. Jesus' baptism is about God's solidarity with us in Christ. Once more, Jesus takes on the messiness of human sin by heading into the waters with the sinners, "joining us in the water, in the mud, in the skin to show us how its done."<sup>1</sup>

Douglas Hare goes on to say:

*The one who will save his people from their sins ... must consecrate himself to his vocation by joining the sinful multitude in the waters of the Jordan. As the one destined to be their lord and king he accepts the sacrament of the renewal of God's people. In so doing, however, he takes the first step on the road to Calvary.*<sup>2</sup>

In **our** baptism, Christ's solidarity with us is made known once again. This time, though, Jesus raises us to new life in him. Yes, baptism is a sign of the forgiveness of our sins, but the sacrament reminds us that this forgiveness comes not by virtue of our righteous works, but through the righteousness graciously bestowed upon us through the saving work of Jesus Christ. In our baptism we join Christ on the cross, dying to sin. In our baptism we join Christ in the resurrection, and by grace Christ raises us from death into life. We catch a glimpse of the invisible reality of the power and breadth and depth of God's grace in our baptism, and see for ourselves that not even our sin can loosen God's grip on us.

In our baptism the words Jesus heard as he emerged from the Jordan become God's words to us. "You are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." Through Christ we are grafted into the family of faith, claimed as God's own, set apart for service and strengthened for this call. In our baptism we are reminded of God's gracious acceptance of us, and of the Godhead's collective initiative to reconcile us to God's self and to one another. As Jesus was claimed by the Creator when the heavens opened at his baptism, through Christ God claims us too. As Jesus was anointed and appointed by the Spirit for service, through Christ the Spirit anoints us too.

The home movie continues:

Still in church, the filmmaker shifts the camera from my parents and me, from the other babies in their mothers' arms, and turns the camera to my family gathered around. The first person coming into focus is my Pap Milligan, who smiles broadly for the camera with the sunlight streaming in through the sanctuary windows behind him. Then over to the left, we see Gram Milligan holding my cousin Terri, who was about two-and-a-half at the time. The camera shifts to my great aunt, a sister with the Vincentian Sisters of Charity, dressed in a full long black habit—who we called Auntie Sister—she smiles and nods at the camera. The next shot has us back at home, where my great grandfather is bouncing me on his knee.

Each of these people so dear to me has since passed away. But the image of their presence of them gathered, with others at my baptism, reminded me of the power of the witness of a family of faith—both a family of faith at home, and a family of faith who gather as members of God's Church. Each of these persons is a part of the Communion of saints—those who stood around me in my baptism not just to witness a family event, but whose presence that day signified their commitment to nurturing me in my life of faith, whose daily examples of faith and of struggle witnessed to me the power of God's love in their lives and mine.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown; *Mixed Blessings* p 56.

<sup>2</sup> Hare, Douglas; *Matthew: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*; p21.

I am reminded by my baptism that **we are in our baptism claimed for something bigger**. We are claimed in our baptism not only for relationship with God but also for relationship with one another. We are grafted into the family of faith, the Church Universal, united with all of God's children as the song said "of future, present, past." We are, as Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians, members of the body of Christ—unique, different, yet united in purpose and held as one by Christ who is our Head.

As Presbyterians we celebrate baptism in corporate worship, remembering that baptism unites us a family of faith. Not only do the parents of an infant or an adult professing their faith make promises to God and to the community, so too do we promise to nurture one another in faith, to accept the one being baptized as a part of our family of faith, to not only witness grace at work in one another's lives but to be instruments of God's grace to one another, with God's help.

The promises of baptism are radical in a world so set on individualism and polarizing division. Living into such promises is nothing short of revolutionary. In living into our baptism, we partner with Christ in a life of relational solidarity with those around us—those who merit our love and those who do not. We stand in the waters as Christ did for us, wading into the messiness of human life, facing head on the sins and struggles of those in our midst, and even bearing a bit of one another's burdens.

Humbled and grateful by God's acceptance of us, we extend acceptance to our brothers and sisters—whether they have merited our love or not—aware that our own acceptance was unmerited itself, and was won by Christ alone. Now don't get me wrong—this is not a call to accept violent or harmful behaviors, or to ignore choices or systems of injustice that persist in injuring and devaluing another. Rather, it is a call to honor the full humanity of all of God's people, to recognize the potential for anyone to love and be loved, and to live into God's call to live into this love. By meditating on God's claim on us, we develop an awareness of our oneness—whether man or woman, black or white, gay or straight, Democrat or Republican, American or Iraqi, rich or poor, young or old, ... The list goes on.

Today we remember Christ's baptism, and in doing so we can't help but remember ours. And in doing so, we remember God's promise to us: the promise of forgiveness, the promise of acceptance, the promise of new life. And then we are invited too, to remember the promises we have made to one another: to nurture one another in faith, to bear witness to God's love in the life of our family of faith, to BE the body of Christ in this aching and broken world.

Remember your baptism: when you wash your hands after digging in the garden or wiping your child's nose; when you scrub clean pots and pans after dinner or soak in the tub at the end of a long day. Remember your baptism when you are forgiven or when you encounter someone who is in need of forgiveness. Remember your baptism when you experience renewal and when you encounter someone who is in need of new life.

And then we must remember that baptism is part of a call—that with Christ's help we are called live into these baptismal promises. That we might be agents of wholeness, forgiveness, hope and healing in a broken world. Let us partner with Christ on this spiritual discipline of promise-keeping. It won't be easy, but it will be worth it—for the glory it will bring to God and for the hope it will bring to this world.