

January 12, 2014

TEXT: Matthew 3:13-17

TITLE: We are Commissioned

All four gospels tell of Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan river. But Matthew's is the version we accept as normative. Maybe because it's the first one of the four. Maybe because it has that wonderful interchange between John and Jesus in which the baptizer tries to refuse to pour water on Jesus, but Jesus insists saying, "Let it be so." Then Jesus goes on to say, "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." I'm not sure what that means – the text doesn't elaborate. But it is enough to silence John's objections. And so Jesus is baptized. And the heavens open and the Spirit of God descends – not to possess or charismatically overwhelm Jesus, but simply to alight on him. And the heavenly voice announces, "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased." A lot of good stuff in those few verses. I guess that's the reason we like Matthew's baptism story the best.

Rodger Nishioka, a Presbyterian professor and perennial youth worker, tells a baptism story about Kyle. Kyle and his family started to come to church when Kyle was in fifth grade. Over the years, they attended sporadically, but when Kyle entered high school, Rodger asked him if he wanted to join the confirmation class. Rodger was somewhat surprised when Kyle said "yes," and was very pleased when Kyle was serious in attending the classes. He rarely missed an event and made some good friends among the other ninth-graders. Since Kyle had not yet been baptized, he was not only confirmed but also baptized on Pentecost Sunday, surrounded by the other confirmands and mentors there in front of the whole church. But then Kyle stopped attending. In the weeks thereafter he was noticeably absent. So Rodger did what pastors do – he called to check in with Kyle and his folks. When he did so, they seemed a bit surprised. Kyle's mother told Rodger, "Oh, I guess I thought Kyle was all done. I mean, he was baptized and confirmed and everything. Isn't he done now?"¹

In none of the gospel stories is Jesus done once he is baptized by John and steps away from the Jordan River. Jesus does not shake the water from his hair, shake John's hand with a smile and then return to his carpentry shop. In each description of this event, there is a second act after baptism, with Matthew capturing it best – the voice saying "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Now there are lots of reasons why this is said about Jesus. It is both complimentary and messianic, pointing to Jesus as the one who fulfills the old prophecy in 2 Samuel about "God establishing God's eternal kingdom through this one, to whom God will be a father and who shall be a son to God" – as well as the prophecy in Isaiah 42 that says, "Here is my servant, my chosen one, in whom my soul delights. My spirit shall be upon him and he will bring forth justice to the nations."

It is not surprising that such words are spoken about Jesus at his baptism. But we too were baptized. We too were held in the arms of parents and clergy and had water poured on us. We too knelt beside baptism fonts in front of friends and church members. (And let me say right now, if you haven't been baptized, I hope you will consider being baptized – receiving this symbol, this sacrament that best illuminates the thin place where heaven and earth, birth and re-birth come together.) The words spoken long ago were not a one-time event. They are part of being baptized. Perhaps they had their richest meaning on that day with John and Jesus, but they are still just as heartfelt, just as true, when the baptism water glistens on our heads.

In baptism events – the coming forward, the water, the Spirit descending, the words of grace and love – a relationship with God is confirmed. That was true for Jesus, true for us, and was true for Kyle, the young person in Rodger Nishioka's confirmation class. When Rodger met with Kyle's family, he explained how much the church missed Kyle and the family in their worshipping community. Rodger apologized for not being clearer with them about the larger goal of confirmation and how it is not something that is over and done with on Pentecost Sunday. As he put it, "Kyle's baptism and confirmation were not simply about his profession of faith; it was about his continuing to grow in his understanding of what God is calling him to be and do as he lives out his identity as a child of God." Nishioka concluded by noting that Kyle and his family came back to church the next Sunday and were warmly greeted. And they seemed relieved to realize that the journey was not over but was only beginning.

As I said, in baptism, a relationship with God is confirmed. But it is also true that the persons being baptized are commissioned at the same time. A new journey begins, being built around a relationship in which we are named "beloved of God, children with whom God is well pleased." We all need to be more intentional in talking about how baptism and confirmation are not quickly over and done with, but are also acts of commissioning, being sent forth on a life-long journey of faith.

Now back to that intriguing dialogue between John the Baptist and Jesus. Remember John didn't want to baptize Jesus, saying "I need to be baptized by you." But Jesus replied, "Let it be so; in this way we fulfill all righteousness." Now up to this point in history, lots of people did ritual washings. Before going into the temple, you were to wash your hands. And if you were new to the Jewish faith, or as in the case with John, you wished to move away from all impurity and the ways you had defiled the faith, you took a ritual bath and washed your entire self. Now all those acts were self-motivated. All those people approaching John the Baptist were seeking forgiveness and repentance on their own terms. I'm sure most were quite sincere and doing their best. I'm sure others had their fingers crossed behind their back about one or two sins they weren't quite ready to give up. That's why John was so agitated with them. Remember how he said, "Don't come to me presuming to say 'We have Abraham as our ancestor', as if your lineage and reputation will save you. God is able to make children of Abraham

from the mud in the banks of the Jordan River here. Bear fruit worthy of repentance; show me that you mean it.”

Every one of our apologies, every confession of guilt, is imperfect. We name our sins; we admit our failings; but often we get distracted - we don't truly mean what we say – we hang onto the belief that someone else is more sinful than we are. The bottom line is this: None of us do confession perfectly. None of us are blameless before God, nor do we approach the waters of baptism perfectly. John knew that – and Jesus knew that. But Jesus, who was without sin, stepped to the front of the line and was baptized with us and for us. Do you know how sometimes people go to a coffee place and after they place their order, the cashier says, “Oh, the person ahead of you just paid for you.” As trite as it may sound, Jesus paid it forward for all of us. Jesus did baptism perfectly – he fulfilled all righteousness – so that we can step forward with confidence, despite our imperfections and flaws, and receive the full blessing of the baptism waters.

More importantly, he did it so we can be baptized and commissioned, hearing for ourselves those wonderfully welcoming words, “You are my beloved, my child, with whom I am well pleased.” We are now in relation with God, fully, completely – and we are in relationship with one another, who have all been commissioned just like us. We now have an identity and a calling, which nothing – truly nothing – can take away from us.

No matter what anyone else says to you, or says about you, hold on to what has been spoken over you at your baptism. Sense how the Spirit of God rests upon you and think about your commissioning. For God's not done with you yet.

AMEN

¹ Feasting on the Word, Matthew 3:13-17 – Pastoral Perspective; Baptism of the Lord (First Sunday after the Epiphany), pp. 236, 238.