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Matthew 3:13-17

*Let’s Get Real*

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Matthew 3:13-17 New Revised Standard Version

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly 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.”

I was baptized Easter Sunday when I was 5 months old. I don’t remember it, but I remember the story. My grandmother was sick with diabetes when I was born. She was in the hospital, but she was so excited and could not wait to see me. After about 5 months, she passed away and her funeral was on Holy Saturday and I was baptized the next day at the same place, Sewickley Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania. Now, there was much discussion about the name that the pastor would say at my baptism. Apparently there was some worry that my mom would not be able to leave the hospital with me because I was nameless. My dad wanted to name me Cynthia Sumpter, but my mom was concerned that I would have a lisp. So, the compromise of Kerry Sumpter was made. When I was baptized, the pastor put water on my head and declared, “Kerry, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” At that moment my last name became that of Christ, the community acknowledged that I was a child of God.

We don’t think about it much, but for most of us, one thing that brings us to church on Sunday is the fact that we were baptized. Some of you have never been baptized because you’ve never seen any reason why you should be. Some of us were baptized without being given any choice in the matter. I guess you could say that was the case for me. When I was 12 every other Sunday I would go to my dad’s Baptist church and one worship service I was encouraged to walk down the aisle saying that I wanted to be baptized, so I was sprinkled as a baby and dunked as a youth.

Baptism is a beginning. Often as we make our way slowly into faith, the purpose of baptism begins to unfold. We discover what our baptism means after the event rather than before. That’s how it was for Jesus too, at least in Matthew’s Gospel. The story skips from Jesus as an infant to Jesus as a thirty-year-old, and we don’t have a clue as to what happened in between. One day Jesus puts down his hammer, takes off his tool belt, hangs a “Closed” sign on the door of the carpenter’s shop, and asks, “What does God want of me?” Jesus heads south and finds his cousin John, standing in the muddy Jordan in his camel-hair baptismal robe, smelling of locusts and honey. Jesus gets in line and waits his turn. He wades out into the water, right next to real live sinners like you and me.

Matthew’s Gospel is the only one to record the conversation prior to the baptism. Jesus is eager to be baptized, but John hesitates. They stand hip-deep in the river and engage in a fervent theological debate concerning who should baptize whom. The first time Jesus speaks in Matthew’s Gospel, it is to say that he needs to be baptized, because baptism will help him learn who he is meant to be. Jesus leans back into the water because he believes that God is calling him to a different kind of life.

When Jesus stands up, the waters of the Jordan dripping down his face, he sees the Spirit descending like a dove to rest upon his soggy head. The Spirit comes, not as an all-consuming fire of judgment, but with the flutter of hopeful wings. A voice says: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” The Message translation says, “You are my child. I love you. I’m delighted with you.” Then Jesus goes into the desert for forty days to think about what it means to be God’s child. Jesus spends all the days and years that follow that afternoon in the Jordan discovering the meaning of his baptism. Jesus gives everything—his dreams and deeds, his labors and his life itself. Jesus gives himself to God’s people. He takes his place with hurting people. Baptism was Jesus’ commissioning to ministry.

During the week before his death, the leaders of the temple challenge Jesus: “By what authority are you doing these things?” (Matthew 21:23). Jesus answers with a reference to his baptism: “Was the baptism of John from heaven or not? I was baptized. That’s why I do the things I do.” In the waters of baptism, Jesus heard the Spirit calling him to speak the truth and live with grace.

Baptism, like most beginnings, finds meaning long after the event. We’re handed a map, but then we have to take the trip. For the next few weeks we are going to be talking about getting real with one another. There is pain in every one of our stories. And when we come to church we feel like we have to be perfect. Church is the last place we want to admit that we are not perfect. How can we be real, broken people? Greenland Hills is a real church for real people with real problems. It takes our whole lives to finish the journey we begin when we’re baptized. So what does it mean to us to live out our baptism? If we are true to our baptism, we cannot make ourselves comfortable, cannot do only what will be appreciated, and cannot be satisfied with the way things are. Our baptism demands that we struggle with what’s right and what’s wrong, what’s important and what’s not.

Baptism is our ordination to ministry, our vow to live with more concern for the hurting than for our own comfort, and our promise to take issue with ideas with which everyone else agrees. Baptism is the commitment to share our time with the poor and listen to the lonely. God says, Behold, you are my servants, whom I uphold. You are my chosen, in whom I delight. You are God’s beloved child. Think about that for a minute.

God says, “You will be a light to the nations.” But we are a people who prefer darkness. We hide things about ourselves in our closet. We feel guilty and we try to hide. But when we expose our weakness, when we expose all of ourselves then we grow closer to Jesus. I was talking with someone this week who has gone to church their entire life, but they never felt like they had a personal relationship with Jesus. They felt guilty about it, and when they were finally real, exposing their weakness helped them to grow closer to Jesus. Admitting that they didn’t feel like they had a personal relationship with Jesus, helped them to have a personal relationship with Him. Now they pray a prayer throughout the day and that prayer is, “Help me to feel your presence with me.” When we aren’t real with each other and ourselves and God, then we are hiding in the darkness. God tells us to step into the light. In fact, God says we are to be the light.

Do you remember the story of the women washing Jesus’ feet? Luke’s Gospel says she was a woman of the city, who was a sinner. She brings an alabaster flask of ointment and weeping, wipes Jesus’ feet with her hair and kisses his feet and anoints them with the ointment. Simon is very concerned about following the rules, and he sees what is happening and says to himself, if this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. He would know that she is a sinner. And Jesus does know. Jesus turns to the woman and says to Simon, the Pharisee, “Do you see this woman? When I entered your home, you didn’t give me water for my feet, but she wet my feet with tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn’t greet me with a kiss, but she hasn’t stopped kissing my feet since I came in. You didn’t anoint my head with oil, but she has poured perfumed oil on my feet.” Her many sins have been forgiven for she has shown great love. Jesus tells her “your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” (Luke 7:36-50)

You can’t be cleaned from sin, you can’t be set free without being real. When we understand that we are children of God, that we can receive God’s grace and God’s affirmation, then God’s love can soothe our soul and empower our spirit. This is what our baptism is all about, reminding ourselves that we are indeed children of God. It is about affirming the inherent worth of each and every person in the sight of God. In our baptism, as in the baptism of Jesus, we celebrate God's welcoming love.

Brothers and sisters, God loves you - right here - and right now. All people – male, female, black, white, gay, straight, transgender, rich and poor - are called to live out their calling as baptized Christians. We may stumble and feel like we are going through the motions, but remember your baptism. Baptism tells us who we are by reminding us whose we are. We are God’s beloved children. Remember you are God’s child every time you put your hands in the water. I am continually sustained by remembering my baptism and I hope you will remember yours. We are bound together by our baptism.