

## Identity Markers

Matthew 3:13-17

Corinthians 1:10-18

Forest Home Chapel January 19, 2020

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I have a picture of myself as a little girl, about Lilly's age (4) and I am surrounded by birthday presents. A doll, a dish set, some kind of game.

My three brothers are there looking at the cake: chocolate with 7-minute white frosting made with egg whites and sugar; lifesavers on top with candles stuck in the holes of the lifesavers. That was the holy annual ritual of the celebration of my birth. Even my first year in college, my mother made the cake, drove all the way to my school, gave it to me with a kiss and drove back home.

That ritual was a way of saying: Bless the day you were born. I love you. I want to give you everything you need plus. I am here for you, and you are my beloved child.

Baptism is the same thing. Except instead of just your parents saying that (and I am so sorry if they didn't) the Holy Spirit is saying it, and spirit of Jesus is saying it and the whole faith community is saying it together ~ to everyone in the sanctuary:

*Bless the day you were born. We love you, we are here for you, and you are our beloved child. We want to give you everything you need ~ plus.*

At Jesus' Baptism, the heavens opened. God spoke and said: "This is my beloved child whom I have chosen to represent me." But notice that God's voice was heard, not just by Jesus, but also by John the Baptist and his community of followers.

To be baptized is to claim and name ourselves, not just as human beings, but also spiritual beings, on a human journey together. The more that we name and claim this part of ourselves, the more we experience divine presence and transforming power. What we put our attention on increases. That is why we come to church – to be reminded together of our spirit and of the Spirit that moves among us.

On this Sunday when we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, and the Baptism of Lilliana and Nathaniel, and all of us, I would like to share 5 stories that help us understand different aspects of what baptism is about.

- 1. 15-year-old Amy spoke on Confirmation Sunday** about 20 years ago. She said: "Being confirmed (which is a way of saying "yes" to the vow made on your behalf at baptism) is kind of like getting a tattoo. You choose a tattoo to express your identity. Looking at it reminds you of who you are."

Baptism is an identity marker. I know that there are a lot of identity markers in life:

- male female, non-binary, rich, poor, middle class, high school student, toddler, college student, Pepsi drinker, Coke drinker, filtered water drinker,

- Republican, Democrat (both of which have lots of subcategories now) Methodists: traditional and progressive,
- full professors, adjuncts, admin staff, scientist, Iranian, American, neighborhood, artist, numbers-person, special needs, town/ gown,
- sick, well, broken knee cap – senior citizen, musician,
- Nike, Adidas, Hoka, Vans, Converse,
- straight A's, not so many A's student,
- easy to get along with, difficult, introvert, extrovert.

All of these markers define parts of us. People look at our markers sometimes instead of us. But Baptism as an identity marker is different – it says: “I belong to the path of Christ. I claim my spiritual eternal self, even when I’m not feeling it or acting it.” It is an identity marker that is invisible and eternal.

**2<sup>nd</sup> story is from Paul’s letter to the people** in the church in Corinth who were fighting about whose teacher was the best. “I belong to Apollos, I belong to Cephas, I belong to Paul,” they argued implying “my teacher is better than yours”.

Paul said: Wait a minute: you are saying your main identity marker is the teacher who taught you about Christ. Knock it off – your identity is with the power and the presence of Christ himself!

Did your teacher die on the cross for you? Christ did.

Christ suffered with you and for you,

Christ brought all kinds of people together who would never otherwise associate with each other.

Christ healed. Christ honored the poor and advocated for them.

Christ brought women into his ministry when that was unheard of.

Christ forgave his betrayers.

Did your teacher do that for you?

Paul’s message 2000+ years ago is incredibly important for today in our divided world:

*Let’s not identify with what separates us, but with the One whom we aspire to become. That is what Baptism stands for.*

**3<sup>rd</sup> Story is from the sermon that Martin Luther King gave after four little Sunday School girls died** when white supremacists bombed their 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in 1963.

Don’t we wish that never happened again?

First of all, whenever he spoke, King always knew he was addressing the nation.

In 1963 the nation was just as divided as it is now, over most of the same topics.

Naturally, his sermon was very controversial, but looking back it was eternally powerful. He claimed these little girls as martyrs and he called the country to task, to stand up for what is right and true. He said:

**“...these girls have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows.**

**They have something to say to every politician who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism.... they have something to say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution."**

This is what our baptism calls us to do. To be courageously concerned about the welfare of the people in our country and world more than about our own status and money and politics and opinions. That is the spiritual path.

The spiritual path has to speak about economics and politics whether we want it to or not. Jesus certainly did, even though it got him killed.

Then Dr. King continues referencing the cross in the same way that Paul did in the scripture today, reminding us that the cross is the symbol for how we transform terrible tragedy and injustice and large and small pain, how we use it to go higher. King said:

**"History has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive. The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as the redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city.... These tragic deaths may lead our nation to substitute an aristocracy of character for an aristocracy of color. The spilt blood of these innocent girls may cause the whole citizenry of Birmingham to transform the negative extremes of a dark past. into the positive extremes of a bright future."**

This is what baptism is about – it is about claiming the power of transformation-- a sacred, mysterious energy which Jesus taught us through his life and death and resurrection. It is about standing for character and courage, to use Martin Luther King's words.

If you read ahead in the scriptures, right after Jesus was baptized, the Spirit led him into the wilderness, to deal with extremely difficult things. Wilderness is one of those Bible words for: ***"Dang, life can be really, really hard."***

We are baptized into the body of Christ as a gift. The gift of spiritual community to help us navigate everything hard without being alone, or without guidance.

**4<sup>th</sup> story.** I heard a story Friday that is a great example of the gift of community. Three people were on a hike. A young strong guide, an elderly person, and his young grandson. The grandson was huffing and puffing and starting to complain and had fallen way behind, with the kind of anger that you get when you are embarrassed.

The elderly grandfather looked physically stressed but was trying to keep up. The guide realized that the older man should stop and take it easier, but instead of asking:

"Are you ok? Do you want to stop?" He said to the elder: "Hey, would you stop and wait for your grandson, and encourage him, and go at his pace?"

Instead of making him feel inept, the guide gave him a job- to serve another person who was struggling.

Life in community teaches us meaning and purpose by giving us each other to serve and learn from. It gives us a job.

Baptism is like birthday cake, tattoos, Dr. King calling the nation to step up and go beyond division to transformation.

Baptism is like Jesus in the wilderness being tested by the devil and waited on by angels at the same time.

Baptism is like helping each other on a big tough hike, helping us feel like we can do it, and we are not alone, and we are beloved.

**5<sup>th</sup> Story. Our friend Don had a cat he named Stupid.** It was always running away, and Don was always going around the neighborhood yelling: “Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Come home!” One of his neighbors said: “Don, do you know how weird that sounds?” Don changed the cat’s name to Shalom, which means *the peace of God*. The next time the cat ran away he yelled “Shalom! Shalom!” which the neighbors still thought was weird but very sweet. Don swears that after a few days the cat stopped running away.

Baptism is about every day of our life, making the choice whether to call each other and ourselves “stupid” ~ or to know ourselves and one another by our spiritual name: Beloved, “Child of Blessing, Child of Promise, baptized in the Spirit’s sign...”

*(from the Hymn Child of Blessing, Child of Promise)*

That is the good news of the gospel .