

Sunday, January 12, 2020  
The Rev. Katelyn Nutter Dowling

Today's scripture verse is Matthew 3:13-17. Listen now for how the word of God is speaking to you especially today.

"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."

One of my favorite things about Jesus is the same reason why I just adore working with children: Jesus is just so, so, so unexpected. You never know how he's going to show up or what he's going to say when he finally does. When the Israelites predicted that the Savior of the World was coming, they thought he'd be the King of all Kings, Lord of all Lords, ultimate fighter on a horse, high and holy, come down from above and save us all, Jesus Christ.

So when Jesus, the Savior of the World, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, shows up in an animal's feeding stall in a small little town...people are a little bit confused. Are we sure this is him? The one the prophets foretold? Not a king, but born to a nobody with no political background or aspirations? Is this really him?

And then, like I believe we're called to do, he lets his life show off who he is. And so, here we are, some 30 years later and Jesus shows up—not to baptize the people, but to be baptized.

And we wonder, why? Why does the Son of God need to be baptized? And I think, to understand why Jesus was baptized we have to ask—well, why do any of us get baptized?

Some of us probably got baptized as babies. We didn't actively choose that sacrament for ourselves, but our parents and families did. Others maybe as children in a big baptismal pool, or as adults perhaps. Some of us may have been sprinkled or splashed or dunked or dedicated.

We get baptized to say "we're family and we belong to each other." We get baptized to say "I'm living a different kind of life." We get baptized to say "community makes us attached to something bigger than ourselves."

And isn't that all true of Jesus, too? Like us, Jesus has a community that he belongs to and cares for that cares for him. And when we stand behind that font and make promises to that baby—I'll admit it, it's easy. It's easy when they're cute and need snuggles and smell good. But what about when Jesus was in his talkback age? In that age where he might not come to church all the time or wear the right things or maybe when he doesn't believe all the right things or has

questions? Or when he grows up and goes through a tough divorce or doesn't quite know how to react to their teenage daughter's latest antics?

When we say "yes," to that child, we say yes to each other. Keeping those baptismal vows means saying yes to being a confirmand mentor, saying yes to teaching a bible study to younger women, saying yes to visiting the home bound and lonely. When we say our vows during baptism, we are committed to seeing this life through. Teaching and following and caring and walking alongside someone when they struggle.

And Jesus needed that, too. In his final days, Jesus asked his friends to stay up with him. To keep prayer vigil with him. To keep him company and make him feel not alone. And when his friends didn't do that, they broke their baptismal vows that they made here in Matthew 3.

Many people in other traditions think of baptism as an individual act and an individual choice that only affects that person and their faith. Some folks even have private baptisms with only their family present or God parents. But we in the Presbyterian faith (and I think we are following Jesus' example when we do this), believe that faith is a communal act—one that can not be done in private. Baptism is so much more than a cleansing of sins for us. Jesus shows us here in Matthew that baptism is humbling oneself down to become part of a family that points to something bigger than ourselves in this World.

And now we're getting into the depths of theology here because Jesus had to get baptized because he's human, right? Because he's fully human and fully divine. Jesus humanity is so important because it means that Jesus does the things we do to give us the hope that we might be able to do some of the things he does.

I have a friend of mine who is non-binary. That means that they do not identify as either male nor female but somewhere on a spectrum between and both. Their name is Slats, and they call themselves queer. I'll never forget when we were all so confused—how is God both human and divine and yet not completely either? And I'll never forget Slats smile—they wrote a poem and said,

"it is so funny.  
you all are so funny.  
you are worshipping a queer god  
in a queer religion:  
and you do  
not  
even  
realize  
!  
i am just going to lay here  
in the arms of my Savior  
until y'all catch up."

They understood more than anyone what it was like to be both male and female fully. In the same way that Jesus knew what it was like to be both human and divine, Slats knew better than any of us how Jesus could be both and fully both of these two seemingly opposite things. We have so much to learn from each other.

And baptism is the holy moment where we say and do and become just that: people that learn from each other. People that belong to each other.

I have a deep belief that each of us are a facet of the face of God, shining a light on a certain attribute of who God is. And when we say, oh no—you cannot be a member of the family of God—especially to a group of people based on their skin tone or gender identity or sexual orientation or anything we might judge someone for—you are dimming a face of God, saying “oh, we don’t need to know that part of God.”

And I can only imagine how disappointed that must make God—thinking that one part of them is so unnecessary that we don’t even get to know it.

There’s a child I know who moved churches around the time that his former church would have baptized him. And he moved to a Presbyterian church and then only saw babies be baptized over and over again. So I asked the children there to go home and ask their parents the story of when they were baptized—and he vehemently told me that he couldn’t because he wasn’t baptized and never would be.

I asked him why he never would be and he told me the story of how he was wanting to get dunked at his old church but now moved to this church where only babies could be baptized and how we just sprinkled them with water since they couldn’t swim.

And I told him, oh no, here we can baptize you at any age in the world and that we just baptize people as babies more often in our church and that maybe we could talk to his parents about getting him baptized here. And he stopped dead in his tracks and looked at me with the biggest, roundest eyes I’ve ever seen and said, “you mean, it’s not too late for me?”

It’s not too late for him or for any of us to follow Jesus down to the river. To make promises to each other. To fulfill the righteousness as Jesus did. It’s not too late. Come.