

12 January 2014  
Matthew 3:13-17  
Acts 10:34-43

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## A Defining Moment

*A husband and wife were preparing to have breakfast when the wife asked, "Why do I always have to make the coffee?"*

*The husband answered, "Because you're the wife, that's your job."*

*The wife replied, "Well, the Bible doesn't say it's the woman's job to make the coffee, it's the man's!"*

*Taken back by this, the husband demands to see where in the Bible it states that he should be the one to make the coffee.*

*"Well, here it is", the godly woman replied, "Hebrews!"*

Can you think of a defining moment in your life? I'm guessing that we have all had more than one experience that caused us to make a choice or put us in contact with someone who helped us see ourselves just as we are. I thought of a few painful times – the betrayal by a friend, the loss of my parents, the loss of a job. Some of those agonizing experiences led me down the path toward ministry. But I also realized that a chance encounter during a weekend retreat at Silver Lake Conference Center gave me some friends for life.

I was fifteen and going up to the Lake for the first time for a Journeys weekend. There were youth from all over the state. Liz and Rodney and I had never met before yet we hit it off. Our paths crossed again at a conference that summer. The next year found us on camp staff where our friendships solidified. To this day I call them two of my closest friends and we have had adventures together, cried together, laughed, vacationed, and done mission trips together. I know if I need a hand, a shoulder to cry on, or want to do something fun, they will be right there.

The one thing we all had in common even before we met was that we grew up in Congregational churches. We shared our baptism in Christ. I had never thought about our friendship as starting out this way. But if we hadn't been baptized, hadn't been nurtured in our churches, and if we hadn't gone to camp that one weekend, we may never have met. So before that defining moment in the building we call the Cedars, we were set on a path by our parents and our communities. Baptism is a defining moment. And we never know where it will take us.

We make a big deal of it, baptism. Jack is sure fortunate who have parents who want him to be part of this community of faith. We, in turn, enjoy seeing the children, all children, grow up in our midst. We also have a role in nurturing them, greeting them by name, and encouraging them as they explore what it means to be a person of faith. All of this because of a little water and some not-so-magic words.

We teach our confirmation class about the rituals and sacraments of the church. They learn that sacraments – of which there are two – are rituals that we participate in because Jesus did it first. Baptism in the Jewish tradition was seen as a cleansing ritual. John said it simply: Admit your sins, be washed clean. Then why would a messiah need to be washed clean of his sins? We have answered that question over the centuries

by understanding that Jesus needed to set an example. An example of being steeped in the scriptural traditions of his upbringing – Jesus fulfils yet another prophecy.

An example of god-with-us, Immanuel, comes not to be served but to serve.

Then there is the example we tend to forget - the joy God takes in a relationship with God's children. This we see in the appearance of the Holy Spirit accompanied by the voice of God saying, "This is my son, with whom I am well pleased." We learn who Jesus truly is when God speaks from the heavens calling him "my Son" (verse 17).

"It is a profoundly important moment as Jesus is about to encounter the testing in the wilderness (4:1-11) and the beginning of his public ministry (4:12-17).

We hear the affirmation of Jesus and witness the preparatory act for completing the tasks before him.

And we also hear God who says to anyone being baptized, "I love you," "You are mine," and "I am pleased with you." Powerful affirmations to receive from our Creator." Wiseman

In our baptism, and every day, God declares that we are enough. We are accepted just as we are. AND – here is something we may never have realized - God desires to do wonderful things for and through us.

How can our own baptism be a defining moment for us? How can we claim our baptism today and live it out in the days to come? By following Jesus' example of course!

"Jesus submits to this baptism as a fulfillment of God's righteousness (verse 15). Some believe this act was not only a modeling of submission and a consecration to his coming mission, it was also an act of being in 'solidarity with sinners.' Standing in solidarity with those who often feel unworthy of God's love and grace is a powerful act that is vividly portrayed in this text and throughout the ministry of Jesus." Wiseman

Our baptism calls us to stand with others in need of God's love and grace. Peter has an epiphany when he visits the city-state of Caesarea Maritima. It is a Roman state and therefore very pagan in the eyes of Peter and other followers of Jesus. Up until this point, even Jesus, much less his followers, did not set foot in such a pagan location. Now Peter finds himself in the home of an Italian officer named Cornelius. Remember, Jews did not visit homes of Gentiles either. (paraphrased, Carlson)

So Peter is in a city and a house where God's people should not be, when it dawns on him. Jesus sent his disciples out to baptize all nations in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The prophet Joel inspired Peter on Pentecost that all who call upon the name of the Lord would be saved (Acts 2:21; Joel 2:32a). Peter now knows that he is to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations (Luke 24:47).

Jesus' message is for all. Not just for the Jews who followed Jesus. Not just for the Samaritans who followed Jesus. For all...including the Gentiles. "According to Peter, those who do what is right are acceptable to (God) regardless of race... This is incredible coming from a good Jewish boy like Peter who would have been told and taught throughout life that not all are acceptable before God. Jesus, through actions and meetings showed that all who come to him are accepted. The classic (i.e. very old) story illustrates this:

An angel was taking new arrivals on a tour of heaven. The new arrivals were shown many sights and wonders before they arrived at a long corridor which stretched for miles. All along the corridor, at regular intervals, were massive doors each with a sign on it.

One of the new arrivals asked what was behind the doors. The angel pointed to the signs on the doors and as they looked closer the arrivals noticed one door said Protestant another door Baptist and so on. 'Can we go in?' The angel said 'No' but if they wished they could go through a small side door there, behind a two way mirror, they could have a look – if they promised to remain silent.

The group followed the angel utterly intrigued, to the first door, whose sign read "Congregational Church" in large letters. The angel led them through the door to a small room with a two - way mirror where they could see but not be seen. And what a sight it was.

There were multitudes of people all laughing, talking, and eating. There were smiles and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. The group looked on in wonder.

Next the angel took them along the corridor to a door with a sign that said "CATHOLIC". Again the angel showed them to a small room with a two way mirror. Again behind the window were multitudes of Christians laughing, - talking, eating and enjoying themselves.

The next room was marked 'evangelicals' and the exact same was observed as was behind the doors marked Baptists and Pentecostals and Liberals and Conservatives. Eventually one newcomer plucked up the courage to ask the angel a question. 'Listen, we have seen people all around heaven enjoying themselves. These people are too but why are they behind closed doors, Why are they divided?'

'Because,' said the angel, 'they are the people that think they're the only ones here.' (Elston)

That one defining moment in our baptism still defines us today. It defines how we greet and treat each other within these sacred walls. It defines how we should approach our lives lived beyond these walls. In the simplest of ways, it means we are to offer God's love and grace to those who need it. And who might these others be? Since Jesus' message is for all, I think we have our answer.

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