

Sunday, January 12, 2020
First Sunday after the Epiphany – Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Year A)
Matthew 3.13-17
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Baptism: Journey of Becoming”

The day of my ordination as a deacon, those of us being ordained had breakfast with the Bishop before “the big event.” At one point, Bishop Bruno commented that what was about to happen to us—our ordination to Holy Orders—was not the moment we would become clergy. In actuality, we have been on a journey toward and have already become deacons. And that the journey would continue as we eventually became priests, and even as we moved on into our ministries. That this is an ongoing process of becoming. But at some point, we need to make a demarcation, a declaration, an acknowledgment, that we are now something different from what we were before. That we have changed. That we are something new. While this is always an ongoing process, we need a point in time that we can mark as the “official” beginning of our new way of being. That our ordination was merely an official demarcation of what had already been happening in our lives from the beginning of our discernment process, and even before.

As I think about the meaning of Baptism, and particularly as I talked with our baptismal candidates, I realized that the same thing that Bishop Bruno was saying about ordination to Holy Orders also applies to Baptism. The sacramental act of Baptism is not some magical point at which everything changes in our lives. Rather, it is a demarcation, a declaration and acknowledgement of the journey we are on—the journey we have been on for some time. The journey that has led us to acknowledge precisely who we are and whose we are. Baptism is the moment when we publicly affirm where we are in our faith journey. The moment when we are finally able to make a public statement about the journey we have been on and will continue to be on. The journey that has brought us to this point in our lives. The journey that we will continue to make as beloved children of God. In short, the formal dedication of our lives to God. The dedication of lives that have always been God’s. Only now, we realize and recognize what this journey has been about and will always be about.

The Catechism in our *Book of Common Prayer* tells us that a sacrament is an “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace” (BCP, 857). We are also told that the first of those sacraments give by Christ to his Church is Holy Baptism. This sacrament is rich in meaning. On its surface, Baptism is a ritual bath, in which, through the waters of Baptism, we are cleansed. Our sins are washed away. This is accomplished through a deeper meaning of Baptism—one that parallels the death and resurrection experienced by Christ himself. One in which we share in Christ’s death and resurrection. When we go into the waters of Baptism, we die to self. We die to who we once were. In that process, we are joined with Christ in his own death. And then, when we rise out of the waters of Baptism, we are raised to new life in Him. Sharing in the eternal life that is only made possible through Christ’s his own resurrection.

All of this is deeply important in the life of faith. But the most important aspect of Baptism is that through this sacrament, “God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ’s

Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God.” (BCP, 858). In becoming inheritors of the Kingdom, in being included in the promise of eternal life, in being made part of something far bigger than we are—the Body of Christ—we are living more fully into the identity that we already had of being God’s beloved children. We are made complete. Or rather, we are in the process of being made complete, by joining with our brothers and sisters who are on the same journey as we are.

Baptism boils down to partaking in the fullness of who Christ was and is. Sharing in his death and resurrection. Receiving the forgiveness of sins that he obtained through his death and resurrection. Receiving the eternal life that he secured through his death and resurrection. Becoming part of his Body, the Church. And becoming inheritors of the Kingdom that he will usher in at the end of the ages.

That being the case, why did Jesus seek to be baptized as we heard on today’s Gospel reading? If Baptism is about partaking in the fullness of Christ, Jesus already has that covered by virtue of being Christ.

The answer lies in our reading from the Gospel According to Matthew. Before I get there, I want to note that Matthew provides a more complete picture of what Baptism is—Jesus’ Baptism and our own Baptisms—than any other Gospel. Mark and Luke give us cursory summaries of Jesus’ Baptism, merely recounting that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist and recording how when Jesus came out of the water he saw the Holy Spirit descend on him in the form of dove and heard God proclaim “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mk 1.11, Lk 3.22). The Gospel According to John, on the other hand, does not provide a narrative of Jesus’ Baptism. Rather, John’s Gospel merely has John the Baptist, as part of a broader discussion about who Jesus is as the Lamb of God, acknowledging that he did baptize Jesus.

What is unique about today’s account from Matthew’s Gospel is the interplay between Jesus and John the Baptist prior to the actual Baptism. When Jesus asks John to baptize 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 [John the Baptist] consented” (Mt 3.14-15). It was John’s contention that Jesus should be baptizing him, as opposed to the other way around. Jesus explains that he must be baptized to “fulfill all righteousness.” What he is saying is that to be righteous or just is to be faithful to God’s “right” or “just” will. The implication is that Jesus’ Baptism is his personal expression of his own faithfulness to God. That he is faithful to accomplishing God’s purposes. Jesus doesn’t need to be baptized for forgiveness or for new life or to be made complete. He’s already got that covered by virtue of being the Son of God. Rather, he needs—or wants—to be baptized as his own expression of obedience to God and as his personal assent to and affirmation of the ministry that God has prepared and ordained for him.

And then God responds to this act of obedience with his own affirmation. With his own declaration of love and approval. A declaration made in word and in sign. God declares “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3.17). You might have noticed that while Mark and Luke report that God said, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well please”—an affirmation directed to Jesus alone—Matthew reports that God said, “This is my

Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Not a personal affirmation for Jesus’ ears alone, but rather a public affirmation for the ears of all present. A declaration of who Jesus is. A confirmation of the divine authority conferred upon him. And the sign of that authority is the imparting of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who was active in Creation and at Jesus’ conception, is sent to empower Jesus in his ministry.

Matthew’s account of Jesus’ Baptism casts a different light on what Baptism is for Jesus, and for us. Baptism is a sign of our own obedience to the will of God. It is our affirmation that we accept the ministry that God has prepared for us and for us alone. And as a sign of God’s love and approval at our acceptance of his call, he sends the Holy Spirit upon each of us to empower and energize us for our own ministry. Of course, we don’t see the Holy Spirit descend in the form of a dove on those being baptized. Rather, we signify this with the consignation or chrismation, in which the newly baptized is marked with oil in the sign of the cross on their forehead and the words, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever” (BCP, 308).

The sacrament of Baptism is central to who we are as God’s people, as Christ’s Body. So much so that in Matthew’s Gospel, the last thing that Jesus says to his disciples before his ascension is “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28.19) —what we refer to as the Great Commission. None of the other Gospels record such a commissioning. Oh, sure they have Jesus issuing some sort of commission to his disciples before his ascension, but not one focused on Baptism. That’s not to say that the other Gospel writers did not consider Baptism important. But what this does tell us—the fact that the only one of Jesus’ commissions to his disciples that we regularly invoke—is that the Church, as it developed, recognized the centrality of Baptism to our life of faith and to our relationship with God and with Christ.

That’s why we make such a big deal about our Baptismal feast days, of which this is one. Why we make a big deal about doing Baptisms. And why, even when we don’t have Baptisms occurring, we still celebrate by renewing our own Baptismal Vows—as a reminder of just how important that sacrament and what it signifies is to who we are as God’s beloved children and as the Body of Christ. It’s not just about celebrating the forgiveness we receive through Baptism. It’s not just about celebrating the new life that we are promised. It’s not just about celebrating the fact that we have been made part of the Body of Christ. All that is true and important. But perhaps more importantly, this is a reminder to ourselves of who we are and whose we are, and a reaffirmation of our obedience and commitment to God and to the ministries he has set before us. As such, Baptism is a celebration of the glorious journey of faith we have been on from our births and which we will continue to travel throughout our lives. A journey that we joyfully make together, with one another and with our Lord who first showed us the way through his own Baptism.

8:00 – So now, let us celebrate our faith journey and our commitment to God by renewing our own Baptismal Vows.

10:15 – So now, let us celebrate as we baptize Sally and Larry Curry as the newest members of the Body of Christ, welcome them into our family of faith, and invite them to journey with us as God’s beloved children.