

The Beloved

Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus' baptism was important. It was when he was called the beloved and commissioned for his ministry. Our baptisms are important. It was when each of us was called the beloved and commissioned for our ministries.

I found this story in my readings, which I hope will remind you of the importance of your baptism. Kyle was nowhere to be found, and was missed. In the weeks following his baptism on Pentecost Sunday, he was noticeably missing. Several other members of his preparation class asked about him too, as did his mentor. Kyle and his family had come to the congregation when he was in the fifth grade. They attended sporadically, so the pastor was more than a little surprised when the pastor asked him and his parents if he was interested in joining the preparation class and they responded positively. In that congregation, the class was offered to all the ninth-graders (as if God calls all ninth-graders simultaneously to be baptized, just because they are in the ninth grade). Kyle and his parents came for the orientation meeting and agreed to the covenant to participate in two retreats, a mission activity, work with a mentor, and weekly classes for study and exploration. Kyle was serious in attending and missed a class or event rarely. He quickly became a significant part of the group and developed some wonderful friendships with other ninth-graders who had barely known him. Kyle was baptized on Pentecost Sunday. It was a marvelous celebration for all those baptized, their families, and their mentors.

That was pretty much where it ended. That was when the pastor knew they had done something wrong. When the pastor called and checked in with Kyle and his folks, they all seemed a little surprised that the pastor was calling and checking up on them. He distinctly remembered Kyle's mother saying, "Oh, well, I guess I thought

Kyle was all done. I mean, he was baptized and everything. Isn't he done?" That was the problem. Despite their best intentions and despite all that they said and tried to communicate, too many people seem to think that the baptism of the infant or the child or the adolescent or the young adult or the adult is the culminating activity of faith, and then we are all "done." Matthew's description of Jesus' baptism tells us the opposite.

In Matthew's text, the baptism of Jesus was not the ending of his ministry. In Matthew's text, the baptism of Jesus was the *beginning* of his ministry. It was his launching. It was his commissioning to begin the public ministry for which he was created and to which he was called. To be sure, the baptism of Jesus named his identity, and this was crucial. Identity, however, is not a static thing. Our identities grow and deepen, as did Jesus' identity throughout his public ministry. His identity was as much about purpose as it is about personhood.

In days past, some Christian traditions called preparation for baptism or confirmation (depending on whether they practice infant baptism or are like our tradition where we wait until one can decide for oneself about faith and commitment) a "communicants class," because children were not allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper until they had taken this class. Eventually, many of these traditions realized the problem with this, since many of their children were already baptized and were therefore eligible to receive Communion. So the name of the class changed. Many congregations now call it "confirmation" because it confirms the vows made on many children's behalf by their parents and the congregation at the child's infant baptism. We call it new member or preparation class. Any of these terms can be a problem. It is misleading because it indicates for persons like Kyle and his parents that this is the end of the journey, rather than the beginning, as it was for Jesus. For this reason, more and more congregations are adopting the title "commissioning" to indicate that

this is not simply the end of a journey but an important marker that sends us out into a new form of ministry and a new way of being faithful. This term conveys the important idea that all is not done and that our identity, named the beloved in our baptism, is not finished but still growing and developing. **Rodger Y. Nishioka**

Kyle and his family did not understand how baptism changes our lives and makes us the beloved of God, and part of the family. Like in creation water is part of giving us new life. Because we are both spirit and physical, our salvation is worked out through both divine and physical elements. In the case of baptism, the physical element is water. Matthew echoed Genesis when he described Jesus' baptism. Genesis recorded that, in the beginning, the Spirit hovered over the waters. The Word of God was present from the beginning and created the world. What the Word created was good. In Matthew, the Spirit of God once again hovered over the waters, and once again the Word of God spoke. Genesis described God bringing order to chaos through his Word. Matthew described God taming the chaos of our sins through his Word. Genesis described the abundant possibilities of God's creative work. Matthew described the renewal of those possibilities through God's entering into creation in order to redeem it. These parallels clearly link baptism to God's creative acts in our lives.

Water is crucial to creation. It is not the author of life, but it is part of and necessary for life. Water is also part of and necessary for new life in Christ. Water gives witness to God's love for God's people. Blessed by the Word, water is the means by which we are buried and, at least vicariously, experience death. Water is also the means by which we are scrubbed clean of the sins that lead to darkness and death. Water washes us and regenerates us. In the water of baptism, we foreshadow our deaths and emerge victorious to new life in the beloved kingdom.

Of course, water alone does not accomplish any of this; not water alone, but the Word of God "in and with the water," as Luther put it. Jesus offered himself as the answer to John's call for all people to repent, and our cleaning from sin. **Steven D. Driver**

Jesus submitted himself to baptism and he was named by his cousin John as the one who was to come. In his baptism, Jesus' identity was confirmed through heaven's opening and the dove coming down to him and the voice from heaven naming him as God's Son, God's Beloved, the very one who holds God's pleasure; but this confirmation was not the culmination of his ministry. It was the beginning of the remarkable journey that was to lead him to the cross and beyond.

This step beyond baptism is essential; sadly, the church does not call persons to it. That is why all too many young people experience their baptism as a final act, and we end up baptizing young people and mature people by the thousands to leave the church following their baptism. Baptism done right must be paired with commissioning, so that at every turn, as we help persons claim their identity as created in God's image and belonging to God forever, and understanding that they are beloved, that we remind them of their purpose in living out this identity through the ministries to which they have been called.

Now, let's go back to Kyle. When the pastor talked more with Kyle and his parents, he tried better to explain this and to help them understand why he was calling and how much the congregation missed not only Kyle but the whole family's presence in their community. They were all remarkably understanding, and his folks were apologetic. "I guess we just missed this somehow," they said. "And I don't think we did a very good job of conveying this to you and to Kyle," the pastor replied. He also explained that Kyle's relationship with his mentor was not over and that his mentor hoped to continue to be in contact with him in the months and years to come.

Both Kyle's parents were impressed with this and expressed their appreciation. "Kyle's baptism was not simply about his profession of faith," the pastor further explained. "It is about his continuing to grow in his understanding of what God is calling him to do as he lives out his identity as a child of God."

The next Sunday, Kyle and his family came to church and were warmly greeted. They even seemed a little relieved at the realization that the journey was not over but was only beginning. **Rodger Y. Nishioka**

Like Kyle and his family, we need to grow into our identity and our call of being the beloved of God. Live, walk and minister in this knowledge. You are the beloved!

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