

“Connected to Christ ”
Matthew 3:13-17

January 12, 2020

First Sunday After the Epiphany – Baptism of our Lord

In the spring of 1979, I was graduating from college and preparing to head to St. Louis to further my studies at Concordia Seminary. Finances were on my mind. After having the expenses for four years in college to deal with, I was facing the prospect of four more years of expenses at the seminary. A good summer job which surely help.

I managed to land a job with General Motors. I worked third shift in an automobile factory in downtown Detroit for the princely sum of \$9.00 an hour, very good money in that day. After being laid off halfway through the summer, I headed back to Fort Wayne to land another job at a plumbing supply business for the almost princely sum of \$5.00 an hour which, believe it or not was still very good money at that time. I was laid off on a Friday and began my new job the following Monday.

How was I able to get two high paying jobs like I did? Those of you who know me well know that I am not the most mechanically inclined knife in the drawer. I did not get a job helping to build cars on the assembly line on the basis of my mechanical skills. I wasn't a whole lot better at working in the warehouse of a plumbing supply company either. What was my secret? I had connections. The GM plant manager was a member of my seminary roommates church in Detroit and he got us both jobs. When I needed another job midway through the summer, a member of my congregation in Fort Wayne, who owned the plumbing supply business, hired me on the spot, too.

It's another example of not what you know, but who you know. There was nothing dishonest in how I obtained the jobs nor were they phantom jobs where I got money for not working. I did the work and I got the pay myself, but I got the job because I had some well-placed connections who connected me to the jobs

Wouldn't that be nice in all of life? Whenever you had a problem or were in need, it would be nice to have special connections – the kind that could solve your problem or meet your need. Being connected is a good thing. Being disconnected is not. This, of course, is true in our relationship with God.

First of all, it must be said that God created us perfectly and completely connected to Him. Our first parents, Adam & Eve, had the most intimate fellowship and connection to God of anyone who ever lived. Yet, by giving in to Satan's temptation to sin, they quickly disconnected themselves from God – they and their descendents who follow them, including us.

Being disconnected from God is a serious thing. Many people today take sin far too lightly. Even we, as God's people, may often view its effects as not being all that serious. Sin may cause us some temporary problem, make us feel guilty for a while, but that's about it. The fact of the matter is that sin totally disconnects us from God and His love and blessing. Sin, according to the Word of God also disconnects us from life. Death is what we get for sinning. Eventually, if left unchecked, sin will eternally separate us from God with Him in heaven and we in hell. That is what hell is – complete disconnection and separation from God.

As we underestimate the effect of sin, we overestimate our ability to deal with it. We would like to think that we could connect back to God simply by being sorry and trying harder to do better in being good in obeying the Ten Commandments. However, the problem is far more serious than that. On your own, you are no more able to reconnect yourself to God that I was able, on my own, to get a job at General Motors.

We disconnect ourselves every day by our sinning in our thoughts and our words, in addition to our deeds. We not only do the evil which God forbids, but we have often failed to do the good which God commands. We cannot bring ourselves closer to connection with God by doing better. In fact, we draw ourselves farther away from God through continual sin. As we said in our Confession of Sin today, "We cannot free ourselves from our sinful condition." The gap continues to grow and get further and further away from God. Meanwhile, we press on toward judgment, condemnation, and eternal death.

We need a connection – someone who can get us that which we do not deserve. That's exactly what we have in Jesus Christ.

Today, the First Sunday After the Epiphany, commemorates the baptism of our Lord. John the Baptist is baptizing the people of Israel on the other side of the Jordan River. In doing this, he was essentially having the people leave the Promise Land, confess their sins and be baptized (something normally reserved were Gentiles), and receive the forgiveness for their sin.

As John baptizes repentant sinners who have lined up to receive this gift, all of a sudden his cousin, Jesus, appears in the line. John tries to prevent Jesus from being baptized and says, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" At face value, John is correct. This doesn't make any sense. Baptism is for sinners. And John knew that this was the holy Son of God. Jesus had no sin and, therefore, had no need for baptism for Himself.

If Jesus is the Messiah, being baptized made no sense. Many in all of Israel believed (including, apparently, John) that the Messiah was to come in holiness and power. In a blistering sermon just prior to our text, John had thundered, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:11-12) Jesus, standing in line with other penitent sinners, didn't fit the picture John had.

Jesus replies, "Let it be so now, for it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." What is Jesus saying here? He is saying, "Let *this* happen now." In other words, what John had forgotten; what all of Israel had forgotten; and what we often forget is how the kingdom of heaven or, better yet, how the reign of God, would enter this world. It would not begin with Jesus as the mighty Judge who would condemn sin and throw the chaff of humanity in unquenchable fire. As St. John reminds us in His Gospel, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17) Jesus came to SAVE humankind, not destroy it.

Jesus would do this, not by condemning sinners and punishing them, but by standing in the place of sinners as their substitute before God in order to save them. To paraphrase Jesus' reply to John, He is saying, "Let this thing happen NOW." Why? Make no mistake about it, the fire and brimstone of which John had preached would come, but not now, not yet.

What to do in the meantime? Jesus said "It is appropriate for us to fulfill all righteousness." Notice, both Jesus and John together will fulfill all righteousness: John, by preaching and baptizing, and Jesus, by being baptized and ushering in the reign of God on earth. John would preach the righteousness and holiness of God demanded of all people and call people to repent and be forgiven. Jesus, as substitute for every human being, would actually do all of the things God required of humanity in His Law to earn forgiveness for us.

The Son of God would stand in for us, be our connection. First, He was incarnate of the Virgin Mary. This is a fancy way of saying He became a human being in order to stand in for human beings.

Second, He would take on the massive load of sin of all people for all time. Having such a great load, His first step would be to accompany sinners to baptism and identify with them there. As the Bible says, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Thirdly, Jesus would do all the Law of God required of us where we ultimately failed. He would do all of the good which we failed to do. He would avoid all of the bad we so often do. He would be perfect in thought, word, and deed.

Lastly, Jesus would, as our substitute, suffer all of the punishment which we deserved. His ministry comes to a head as the Scriptures are fulfilled in the arrest that leads to His trial and condemnation and crucifixion. There, on the cross, the sinless one will offer up His own life as the ransom payment in the place and for the sake of many. That's why it is "fitting" for Jesus to come and stand in the Jordan River and be baptized for he is standing (literally) in the place of the many.

John was not wrong in what he preached. Later, Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit in the fire, but not at this time. Sometime in the future Jesus will perform the judgment, the condemnation, and the separation of people. At the present, Jesus' willing baptism in the Jordan is a sign that is pointing forward to the hidden and unexpected, shockingly weak and vulnerable in-breaking reign of God. In the greatest of all paradoxes, the enthronement of the king of the Jews takes place on a cross. Israelites of Jesus' time did not believe it. People in our time often reject it.

Yet God did not reject it. Having taken the first step in the long journey which would end at the cross, Jesus was affirmed in His mission immediately. The text says, "And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were open to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'"

The completion of the long journey with Jesus being dead on the cross and its success, rather than failure, was ratified when God the Father raised Jesus from the

dead. Jesus' life of holiness and obedience to the Law of God had been sufficient for you, me, and for all who have ever lived. Jesus' sacrifice of His own life had been successful for you, me and for all who have lived. Jesus' resurrection from the dead assures us that what Jesus shouted from the cross – "It is finished!" - was actually true.

You realize what this means, don't you? You have the way to obtain that which you do not deserve, namely, forgiveness for all of your sins, a new life with purpose now, and eternal life in the presence of God. How? You have a connection. The link is baptism. Jesus steps into baptism as your substitute so that you may step out of your baptism with all that you need.

Paul addresses this in our epistle reading for today. Baptism connects us to Jesus. In our baptism, we have been joined to Jesus' death. His death for sin now becomes our death for sin. We are fully and completely forgiven. The stain has been removed.

In our baptism, we have been connected to Jesus' resurrection. His resurrection from the dead now becomes the basis for our resurrection from the dead. As Jesus said, "Because I live, you will live, too." We shall rise from our graves – we and all who fallen asleep in the faith – to live forever in the presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In our baptism, we are recipients of new life here and now with joy and purpose. This, also, is a result of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. St. Paul writes, "Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the father, we too might walk in newness of life." You are free from the condemnation of sin for it has been forgiven. You are free from the fear of death because it has been defeated. You are free to live lives of love for God and lives of service to all people, friends, family, or even enemies because of Jesus.

The final stanza for the sermon hymn today comforts us, strengthens us, and encourages us when it says:

Now rise, faint hearts, be resolute;
This man is Christ, our substitute!
He was baptized in Jordan's stream,
Proclaimed Redeemer, Lord supreme.

We live confident lives, full of joy and hope, because, although we deserve none of God's blessings, we have a connection – One who has obtained them all in our place for our sake – Jesus Christ. Baptism connects us to Jesus. Jesus connects us to God. As a result, we receive forgiveness, life, and salvation. What a great connection that is! Amen