

**Remember?  
Matthew 3: 14-17  
Don Lincoln**

Most of us pastors have at least one or two funny baptism stories. Just like we have funny wedding stories, funeral stories, and communion stories. Real life happens in the midst of some of the most sacred times – I mean, you can pretty much guarantee if people are involved, sooner or later something is going to go awry or turn out not exactly as planned.

One of my favorite baptism stories comes from John Buchanan – retired pastor from the 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church in Chicago – one of the largest Presbyterian Churches in the country. John had taken the toddler in his arms for baptism – and standing there in the chancel of this huge, stone Gothic sanctuary in downtown Chicago, with four times the seating capacity of Westminster, John sprinkled the child's forehead three times – Father, Son and Holy Spirit....

...and then into his wireless microphone he declared, "You belong to Jesus Christ forever." To which the squirming toddler responded, "**Uh-oh!**" As you might imagine with four times the seating capacity, it brought the house down.

But for some of us, the idea of belonging to someone else forever – even or maybe especially Jesus Christ – might cause us to feel the same way inside, even if we're not going to verbalize it out loud. Some of us were raised with the understanding that such belonging meant a set of rules and restrictions – a straight and narrow, buttoned-up way of living that put a damper on everything that seemed fun or exciting. What we didn't want people saying to us was, "Oh – you're one of those religious types, huh?"

And if we had read today the preceding verses in this Gospel lesson, and John's call to baptism, "REPENT, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand; I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire," many of us might be squirming in our seats muttering under our breath, "Uh-oh."

Which is, perhaps, why John was so disturbed when Jesus came to him for baptism. Jesus had no "Uh-Oh" to offer. The church has always wrestled with – even been embarrassed by – Jesus coming to John, and offering Himself to his cousin and for this baptism of repentance. Of what did Jesus, the perfect Son of God, have to repent?

When John protests, and suggests it should be the other way around – that Jesus should be baptizing HIM – Jesus responds, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Whatever else it may mean, it seems to mean that

in that time, and at that place, it was the right thing to do. And so John did it; he baptized Jesus.

And when Jesus comes out of the water, the heavens open, the Spirit like a dove alights on Him, and a voice says, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'." Another version says, "In whom I take delight." It is perhaps the most intimate statement of Jesus' identity anywhere in scripture..... "My Beloved, in whom I take delight." And so I believe it is instructive to us in OUR baptism as we remember the baptism of the Lord this day, we remember ours as well, and find in this text a clue to OUR identity; YOURS and MINE.<sup>1</sup>

For above all other things – at the very heart of the Gospel – is God's proclamation that you and I are loved. For God so loved the world. LOVED the world. Sure, the bible calls you and me to a life of service, and even sacrifice – ordering our ways of speaking and acting and being in the world that reflects God's desires for humanity – but NONE of that comes first. It is all predicated on the one, profound proclamation, that you and I are loved. First. Foremost. It is who we are: **beloved children of God**.

Some of us still get that backwards. That I need to get my life in order, my priorities straight, my sins in check and my relationships all corrected before God will love me. And if God shows up before then, "Uh-oh."

Wrong. Backwards. It is God's love that compels you and me to consider rearranging our lives to be more in accordance with His will. Love sets the stage, give us the context in which we feel safe enough and free enough, LOVED enough to rearrange, with God's help, who we are for God's purposes in the world.

My colleague Debi Thomas, who writes weekly on the lectionary, wrote this week about her baptism. While Debi doesn't remember when she began, her family tells her she started begging her pastor father for baptism when she was barely three years old. In the evangelical tradition in which she was raised, baptism was by immersion at an age of accountability, and signified a stepping forward – a personal declaration of faith; choosing to follow Christ.

Debi's father refused his three-year old daughter. He wanted to make sure she understood what she was doing before she participated in a sacred ritual of the Church. Debi won't argue with this understanding of the sacrament, and still finds it meaningful in many ways. But she writes this:

So, when I **WAS** baptized – baptism, I thought, was all about my effort, my obedience, my responsibility. So much depended on *me*! There were so many ways I could mess up!

I had no idea that my "personal decision to love God," important though it is, pales in significance to God's cosmic decision to love me — and the whole of humanity and creation along with me. I didn't know that God was ushering

me into a Story — a huge, sprawling Story that began eons before I showed up in my father's study with tiny fistfuls of belief.

Debi continues: Of course, the irony of my father's caution with his three-year-old daughter is not lost on me now.

If there was ever a time when I "understood what I was doing" as a Christian, it was probably at age three. Full of trust, open to love, and wholly captivated by Mystery. My adult life has been one long attempt to return to such simple, beautiful comprehension of God's love for me.<sup>2</sup>

You are a beloved child of God. I am absolutely certain that it's what we all yearn to know, in the deepest place of our hearts.

Because over and over in our lives we hear the voices – sometimes of even parents – that tell us we aren't good enough. Reports cards that say we're not smart enough. Peers that say we're not cool enough. Colleagues, family and friends who say we are not successful enough; not attractive enough; not important enough; not worthy enough.

Baptism declares the one thing that really matters, the one core, central thing you and I need to know. We – you and I – are beloved children of God.

God has claimed all people as God's beloved children. Some of us just don't know it yet.

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Remembering our baptism is about knowing it. Knowing God's love. Not making yourself ready for or worthy of that love. It's a given before you and I can ever do a thing. It's a way to acknowledge the reality – you belong to Jesus Christ forever and there's no "Uh-oh" in that at all – only a "Thanks be to God."

**I'm going to invite pastors Jennie (Jon) and Ann to the font** – and if you'll turn in the bulletin – you'll find the questions from our Presbyterian Book of Common Worship for a congregational reaffirmation of baptism. If you've never been baptized, feel free to respond, if you choose, as an affirmation that you are a beloved child of God, and belong to Jesus Christ forever, and know it today.

**AMEN.**

1. Jim Somerville
2. Debi Thomas, [www.JourneyWithJesus.net](http://www.JourneyWithJesus.net)