

What Do You Bring to the Font?

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First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ
Burlington, Vermont

Luke 3:15-22

15As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." 18So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. 19But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, 20added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

21Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

In Tanzania, I can recall one Saturday morning having to go to the bank in the town of Iringa. The Saturday morning trip turned into an extensive project because I had to stand in a rather long line. It was pleasant actually having the time to visit with the people one either side of me. No rush. I could linger to watch and listen. When I got up to the teller, after about 45 minutes, I had to fill out a long form to cash my traveler's checks. Then the teller, after looking it over carefully, took the form to the back of the bank, where someone took about 15 minutes to check everything out to be sure it was on the up and up. That bank official put a stamp on the form with their approval. The form was then passed on to yet another person who cross-checked the work. Finally, it went to someone else who distributed the money. It took about an hour.

The Tanzanian bank experience was some what different from TD Bank where Regis Philbin and Kelly Ripa have told me that it is the world's most convenient bank. When I do my banking, it's nice to just slip my debit card into a machine, take the money and run. I can even zip in to some TD Bank locations on Sunday afternoons to get some help from a teller who efficiently helps me. Nice.

But in Tanzania, banking is not built around my impatience and personal needs or the marketing ministrations of Regis and Kelly. Instead banking, Tanzanian style, slows everything down and reminds me that I am just one more person in the crowd. You just have to stand in line and wait your turn. It is a good humbling lesson for us moderns addicted more to efficiency than relationships. The way Luke tells the story of Jesus' baptism, Jesus had to stand in line like everybody else. When Luke says, "now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized", you can't help but get the sense that the most signal moment in Jesus' life necessarily had to be shared with everyone else. In Matthew and Mark, the account of Jesus' baptism focuses exclusively on him. But for Luke, Jesus is not set apart but is just one of the crowd. One with all of humanity. He had to wait his turn like everyone else. In fact, it would

appear he was nowhere near the front of the line. In Christ, no one gets preferential treatment. This is not Burger King where you get to have it your way.

So what does this story tell us about baptism? I think baptism brings us closer to the whole human race. We are, as Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, part of a single garment of destiny. So often in our world, people are elevated over others because of their race or how much money they make. We want to think that some folks are just a little more special and belong at the front of the line ahead of other folks. Even Christians have used their baptisms as a way to boast themselves and shove themselves to the front of the line at the expense of people of other faiths. So when the text says, all the people were baptized and Jesus was also baptized, it was Luke's way of saying that Jesus shared a common humanity with everyone else. We share a common font. It does not matter what line you were standing in when you were baptized, it is all good, and it is all fully sufficient.

The story, of course, does eventually single out Jesus. John referred to Jesus as the one greater than him. And it does say that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and God called Jesus his beloved son. The descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus might suggest that he is set apart in some way. But, when we as Christians share in Jesus baptism, we must remember that each of us, like Christ, is deeply beloved and created in the image of God. Each of us is loved so much. We have a name and an identity and a sense of belonging.

So often in our world, we have such a transient existence. Many of us live far from family and friends. Our jobs shift around a lot. We can lose our sense of place. We are no longer near home or where we grew up. We are sometimes not sure who we are because our identity is no longer tied to a job, a place or even a stable family situation for some. Some may ask, who am I really after I retire? Baptism, however, confers on us an identity which does not rely on what sort of job we hold, how young or old we are, or the sort of family constellation that we are in.

Baptism is also about God's relationship with us that cannot be shaken. According to David Lose, "our relationship with God is the one relationship in life that we can't screw up precisely because we did not establish it. We can neglect this relationship, we can deny it, we run away from it, we ignore it, but we cannot destroy it. That is because God loves us too deeply and completely to ever let us go."¹ As Adrienne is so fond of saying, God loves you, God loves you now and God will always love you. In this age, when so many relationships are fragile or tattered, it may come as good news that this primary relationship we have with God remains solid and intact no matter what. So baptism in Christ is about remembering that we are part of the human race.

In baptism, we let die the sin of using religion, or even Jesus' name as a way to elevate ourselves above others. In baptism, we strip away the pretense, and remember we that we are part of the human race, and that we have to stand in line and wait our turn like the rest of the world. With baptism, we discover a profound new identity in Christ which is not dependent on our job or our family. It's an identity we carry with us even when familiar ground shifts under our feet and we find ourselves in a dark wood. And finally, baptism is about realizing that we are profoundly loved and God has a relationship with us which never can be broken.

So the question next is what do we do with the love and the grace? Baptism is not a form of what Bonhoeffer calls a cheap grace which has no cost and asks nothing of us. Instead, Martin Luther would say that when we are so deeply loved and find a new identity in Christ, we can see more clearly the ways in which human beings can diminish life. If we are overwhelmed by God's love, we can join John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Christ's baptism, to see sinfulness and strongly and powerfully stand up to the evils of Herod. Through the love we have known in our own lives, we can more clearly see those situations which crush the poor and the disenfranchised in order to more clearly speak truth to power proclaim good news to all people. Each of us, and I mean each one of us, has a calling to bring life to others in the face of death. Living into our baptism, means offering a love which reflects God's love whether it means lingering a little longer to offer a kind word to a young person or being there for a discouraged person in their time of need. It can mean extending hospitality to a stranger. It can mean lifting up your voice for the poor. It can mean doing everything in your power to bring an end to war. There is so much pressure, sometimes, to keep our head down and do and say nothing. But living into our baptism means prophetically offering the love and grace which we have known in our own hearts that others may touch and see that love as well. Make it real.

I don't care who you are, each of us has the ability to offer love and life. Perhaps as you leave here today, you could remember these words, "I am God's beloved child, called and sent to make a difference in the world". When you wash your hands or stand in the shower or jump in a pool, you might repeat those words. Join the human race, feel the love, embrace life and give that life to someone else. Amen.

ⁱ David Lose, "Preaching a More Meaningful Baptism",
www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=654