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Baptism of the Lord
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Matthew 3:13-17

Still Wet

Each of the Gospel writers tells of Jesus being baptized. Our New Testament lesson is from Matthew and he describes the day that Jesus joined with others being baptized by John in the river Jordan. Let us listen for God's word as it comes to us through Matthew's words.

There is a story that a Presbyterian pastor tells about one of those embarrassing moments in ministry. He was in the middle of performing a wedding ceremony, just about to lead the couple through their vows, when, all of a sudden, he forgot the name of the groom. (I, for one, can't imagine ever forgetting something while in worship) Trying to cover the awkward moment, the pastor asked the groom with great solemnity "With what name were you baptized?" The groom, a bit taken aback, paused. But then with great confidence, he responded, "I was baptized with the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!" This didn't help the pastor much, but at least the fellow understood the meaning of baptism!

I often enjoy asking "do you remember your Baptism?" I hear so many great stories in response. Some people were baptized as infants and remember only what their parents told them. Some were baptized later in life when they chose the moment they would receive the sign of grace that comes in the sacrament of baptism. A few years ago, I learned that I had been holding on to the wrong baptism story as my own. (There are five kids in my family- stories get mixed up.) My parents have been going through their files and they found all of our baptism certificates. All these years I thought I was baptized UCC in the church right around the corner from where I lived in Madison, but in truth I was baptized a Lutheran in a now

defunct movie theatre. (Actually, it is now the civic center. My parents say that explains a lot, I'm not sure what it explains but ah well.) It is wonderful to hear the variety of baptism stories, for many times in our collective worship we are called to remember our baptism, we are to recall that we are called by name and claimed by God's love. More than remembering the specifics of our individual baptisms remembering our baptism is to remind ourselves and refresh within us the beginning, the new life that is already underway.

In all of the gospel accounts describing the baptism of Jesus, one question remains unanswered. Why was Jesus baptized? Why did he need to be baptized? After all, according to John, baptism is for the purpose of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. What did Jesus need to repent of? And what did he need to be forgiven for? Actually, when you think about it, Jesus is to do baptizing in a fashion greater than John, and as far as we know he never baptizes anyone. For some reason Jesus submits to baptism himself, kneeling in the mud and the muck. It is for the same reason he is born in a manger, that he eats with prostitutes and tax collectors, that he cries and prays and sleeps in a garden, and that he dies a painful, very human death. It is quite simply because Jesus comes to be like us, so we can grow to be like him. Jesus is baptized into our

humanity, so that we can be baptized into his divinity.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, those who are baptized in the same font become siblings—they are considered the same flesh and blood—they are kin with one another. In this sense, Jesus became siblings with the crowd, all those with whom he was baptized in the River Jordan. When we are baptized into Christ in the waters of the font, we too become siblings, with Christ and with one another. The personal name we receive is important. But much more important is the spiritual name we receive—Christian—bearer of Christ—brother and sister of Christ.

The Greek word for baptism means: "To dip, to immerse, to submerge—and my favorite—to soak." Baptism is, for all of us the bath of the Beloved, when God takes pleasure in soaking us—soaking us with water, soaking us with grace, soaking us with blessing. When I read about Jesus' baptism, what I understand is happening is very different than what traditional doctrines have explained. Rather than saving us from original sin, Jesus' baptism mirrors for us our original blessing—encouraging us to become servants of love—offering blessing and not judgment to others. And despite the fact that we remain partial, sinful, fragile, imperfect people, our original blessing can empower us if we

remember that we are baptized.

What is most important about our text for today is how it ends. Up until this time God would have been viewed in an ancient way, as being distant and vengeful. But now things are different. God has drawn near and everything has changed with Jesus being the Christ. After this remarkable transformation—from thunder theology into tender theology, after the change of this abstract, awesome God into a fragile, flesh and blood God—after the Heavenly One decides to become earthly—it is then that the Creator God responds in a very particular way. Quite simply, God is delighted! If you have ever wondered if God is a mean God or a merciful God—if you have ever worried that God may blast us instead of bless us—if you ever have thought that God is a God of law more than a God of Love—well, the 17th verse of the third chapter of Matthew alleviates our confusion. The Voice of God speaks once again.

This Voice is warm and welcoming. "You are my Son, the Beloved One; with you I am well pleased." To the man in the mud, this Son who has become a servant, God speaks. Even before Jesus has done anything noteworthy or worthwhile God praises him. God affirms that Jesus is precious, that he is unique, and that he is loved— not for

what he does but for who he is. In this baptism scene, God echoes the divine delight and pleasure that was expressed in the very beginning days of creation. After the creation of the sea and the dry land, God said, "It is good." After the creation of the light and the dark, the star and sun and moon, God said, "It is good." After the creation of the birds and the animals, the plants and the trees and the fish of the sea, God said, "it is very good." After the creation of man and woman in God's image, God said, "it is good. It is very, very good." After the baptism of Jesus, after this total immersion into the human condition, God says, "This is good. This is delightful. This is the Beloved, who brings me great pleasure. This is very, very good." So it is with each one of us when we are baptized. We too are blessed as the Beloved. We too bring pleasure to God.

Today we will celebrate the ordination and installation of new elders and deacons, a setting apart for particular ministry through the laying on of hands.

Ordination is seen as a continuation of baptism, our calling to give away our lives in love. Each time we celebrate baptism or ordination or anytime we reflect on and remember our baptism may we remember that we are always drenched with grace, each one of us has our original blessing—the waters of baptism that have washed over our lives.

Each one of us can be reminded of God's Voice in our lives. The voice that says "You are my child, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased."

Let us remember our baptism, remember that we are blessed. Remember that we belong. Remember that we are the beloved. And remember that it is a gracious God that has taken delight and pleasure in who we are and who we are becoming. This profound gift changes us. This profound Gift defines us. This profound gift is what we have to share with the world. How can we do anything else but be a blessing to others? How can we do anything else but find and name the beloved—to give to others a sense of belonging in God's family? This is the Gift of this day. This is the Good News of this day. This is the call of this day. And it is very, very good. Amen.