

BAPTISM OF JESUS
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A reading from the Gospel of Matthew:

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

I can never read this passage without my mind going back to a preaching class and Judith McDaniel criticizing my sermon on the baptism of Jesus because I didn't answer the question, why did Jesus need to be baptized. For us who are living through what many are now calling a new reformation of religious belief the answer has changed from that of the past several centuries. Now why do I say this. I start as I often do with a passage by Richard Rohr from last Monday's daily reflection.

"Christianity is meant to be a loving way of life now, not just a system of beliefs and requirements that people hope will earn them a later reward in heaven."¹ If you believe that the primary purpose of baptism is as an entrance requirement for heaven then you really do wonder why does Jesus ask to be baptized.

Talk to many Christians and their answer for the reason for baptism in general is that this is one of the things you must do to enter heaven. However as I tell everyone who comes to be baptized or to have their child baptized, baptism is far more than just fire insurance. That view is exactly what Richard is writing against in the previous quote. That is focused on what happens after death, not on what happens in this life which is where we are called to be heralds of the kingdom. This is the kingdom that Jesus during his time on earth says several times is close.

There was a Dear Abby column on Tuesday where a person asked if it was ok to secretly baptize a grandchild because the parents were opposed to the church. Not only is it wrong, but it really is poor understanding of baptismal theology. Baptism in our church is a public act with promises to support the person or raise

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the child as a Christian. It is more about the here and now rather than the great beyond after death.

On Monday Richard wrote this. *“All too often religion—and Christianity in particular—has focused on continually re-icing a collapsed cake rather than baking the bottom layers properly. In other words, we keep redoing the “fixings”: refining doctrines, moralities, beliefs, and belonging systems. But again and again they seem to fall apart, because Christianity isn’t primarily a moral matter; it’s a mystical matter that only works when the mind and heart operate with some newly installed “software.”*

We must begin with who God is, the very shape of God, in whose image all is created (Genesis 1:26-27). Our operative image of God is the first foundation of all religion, the bottom layer of the cake, so to speak. For Christians, the shape of God is Trinity—mutual emptying and infilling, and infinitely so. We’ve had the doctrine of the Trinity described for us since the fourth century, but we have barely begun to draw out the wonderful implications.”²

So the answer to my preaching professor is that the reason for Jesus’ baptism really depends on your view of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. This question also enters into the whole theology behind baptism. In Richard Rohr’s words of the previous quote what is the base layer of your theological cake?

If your base layer is one where God is a judge with a long list of rules that must be followed in order to earn your place in heaven then you will have a problem with accepting that God is a God of total love. This law oriented view of God requires a blood sacrifice in the form of Jesus to change God’s mind about humanity. An image of God who is angry with humanity is going to result in a belief set that holds a heaven of eternal bliss, but also a hell of eternal damnation. This God then requires a sinless Jesus to be sacrificed to change his mind about condemning all of us to eternal fire.

However even in the Hebrew Scriptures we hear that God created us in his image and likeness. We also hear in the creation story that God created the earth and five times declares it is good and the sixth time declares it is very good. All that God created is good, yet we so often skip over this part of the creation story and go to Genesis 3 and the Garden of Eden. When then impose on this Jewish story the doctrine of original sin that Augustine developed. Please note that the notion of original sin is something Jesus would never have known! Jewish theology looks at the creation and the garden as one of original blessing as Matthew Fox calls it.

Baptism is a turning around in the service as we know do it. The Greek word is *metanoia*/ There are three renunciations and three affirmations are part of the

² *ibid*

baptism service. The person being baptized is asked (and by the way this is why I prefer doing adults) three times to renounce evil. In the ancient world they would do this facing west. Then they would literally turn around, face east and answer the three questions about affirming belief in Jesus. **The turning around, the changing of the mind is all about us not God!**

“Why did Jesus come? Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity. It didn't need changing. God has organically, inherently loved what God created from the moment God created it. Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.

As our image of God changes, our image of God's creation, including ourselves, changes as well. Jesus shows us what it looks like for God to be incarnate in humanity. He holds together the human and the divine so that we might follow him and do the same.

Jesus shows us that the pattern of everything is death and resurrection. Jesus is the archetypal pattern for every life, including yours and mine. There will be suffering and death along with love, joy, and resurrection. Most of us are so resistant to accepting suffering that Jesus walked through it himself and said, “Follow me.” He showed us that on the other side of suffering is transformation. Love is stronger than death. The full, vibrant life that Jesus offers is big enough to include even its opposite: death. Unless a religion directly faces the issues of suffering and death, it is rather useless religion. Jesus holds these big questions front and center.”³

So Jesus is baptized because he took on our humanity. It was the first act as an adult that begins to show us how to be fully human. Notice that in all the gospels the next thing that happens is the 40 days in the wilderness and his temptation by the devil. Again this is all about his taking on our humanity, our pain, our hunger, our desire everything about being human. Jesus shows us that even though life brings us challenge we can and will overcome these challenges.

Suffering is part of life, not punishment because we messed up somehow. This is about learning to depend on Jesus, on God, on the Holy Spirit. This is about entering into the divine dance of the Trinity that I preached about on Christmas Day and you will hear more about in the coming year. You cannot look at salvation unless you consider his incarnation as well as crucifixion. In fact for me and other theologians like Richard Rohr, his incarnation is the saving act. The saving act culminates in his taking on the ultimate pain of our world in

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his crucifixion and then overcoming that death in the resurrection. You need all three!

Jesus was baptized to change our minds about God and to begin to show us how to be fully human.

To read more about these Richard Rohr passages please visit his website www.cac.org