

Why Baptism?

Mark 1:4-11

I wonder if any of you have had the experience of re-reading something you've read dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of times before and finding something completely new in it, some detail you never noticed, some nuance of meaning that you never quite grasped before, some question that you never asked yourself? This happened to me as I prepared for this sermon. I find that the Bible has a way of doing this to us, of speaking to us in whatever place we find ourselves, of addressing our needs and our issues, of coming to life in a very personal way. I think this has to do with the way that our personal context changes with time. The way we relate to Scripture depends upon many factors including our emotional state, the personal issues we struggle with, the concerns of our friends and family, and so on.

So as I pondered Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus, I found myself fixated on the phrase in verse 4 indicating that John was "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Wait a minute, I said to myself. My understanding of Jesus includes the idea that Jesus was without sin, that Jesus' sinless life allowed him to be the unblemished sacrifice that gained the forgiveness of sins for all of humankind. If that is the case, I asked myself, then why would Jesus need to be baptized? Where did the idea of baptism come from, anyway? What does it mean? What did it mean to Jesus and to the people of Jerusalem in that period of history? Noticing this issue in Mark's account really primed my sense of curiosity!

In its Judeo-Christian context, the rite of baptism has its origin in ritual purifications by washing that were a strong part of Israelite tradition. Scholars indicate that the literal meaning of the Greek word, βαπτίζω, is "to place into" and thus baptism

involves placing something (or someone) into a new relationship with something (or someone) else. So baptism became a water ritual for the purpose of establishing or renewing a relationship with God. By the time of Jesus, baptism was one of the three ritual requirements for a Gentile converting Judaism. These requirements included circumcision for male converts, baptism in the presence of multiple witnesses, and formal sacrifice in the temple at Jerusalem. Since this was the only context in which baptism was formally recognized in the Jewish religion, receiving the rite of baptism would have been embarrassing for a member of the religious establishment.

So why would Jesus need to participate in a ritual baptism? One reason for this can be found in the idea of repentance. We mostly think of repentance as a call to turn away from sin, but it also includes a requirement to turn *toward* God. This component of repentance is also implicit in

the understanding that baptism centers on the creation or renewal of a relationship with God. In fact, if we recognize that sin is the fundamental factor that separates us, as human beings, from God, then turning away from sin in repentance *must* include a turn toward God as the source of life and goodness. So one reason that Jesus would participate in a ritual baptism is to express the importance of a reverent relationship with God.

A second reason that Jesus may have participated in the rite of baptism is to model the humility that he expected to characterize his followers. This is the humility described in Philippians 2:5-8: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death – even

death on a cross.” This is the humility that expresses itself as love for the other, the humility that puts the other’s needs before one’s own needs, the humility that recognizes and celebrates our common human dignity. This is the humility embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and Christ first expressed it in his submission to the baptism of John.

A third reason that Jesus may have participated in John’s baptism can be found in the prophetic message of his ministry. One of the major themes that Jesus emphasized in his teaching is the idea that the Jewish religious establishment had lost touch with the reasons for their religious practices. Quite simply, they had lost touch with their roots and with the people because they had become more concerned with maintaining the institution of the Jewish temple. Perhaps they had even lost touch with God. The formal sacrifices and offerings for sin and for purification had become more

concerned with maintaining the purity of the temple than that of the people. The rich lifestyle of the sizeable priestly class was maintained on the backs and by the labor and sacrifice of the common people. Contrast that with the simple lifestyle led by John the Baptist. The text tells us that John wore clothes made of camel hair and a leather belt, clearly these were simple but functional garments. Similarly, John ate food that was readily and naturally available to him but that was also religiously permitted (dried locusts are considered acceptable by Jewish dietary law and honey was harvested from wild bees that lived in the rocky clefts surrounding the Jordan river). And John proclaimed an accessible message about forgiveness for the common people. By submitting to John's baptism, Jesus aligns his newly inaugurated ministry with this message of simplicity and salvation for the people of God.

These are all good reasons for Jesus to participate in John's baptism, even though Jesus did not explicitly need the

forgiveness that John's message offered. And yet, I think there is something more to it. You see, throughout the history of the relationship between God and God's chosen people, there is a tension between God's separateness or otherness and God's desire for relationship with people. The First Testament lesson this morning demonstrates that God's first act of creation was an act of separation, distinguishing light from darkness and yet pronouncing the difference good.

The whole history of the people of Israel is a tug of war between the holiness – the *otherness* – of God and the undeniable love of God for God's people. God's otherness is characterized in the God of Moses who dwells upon God's holy mountain and cannot be approached except through a dedicated intermediary, Moses himself. At the same time, the providence and the love of God is manifest in the way God guides and protects the people as a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, and in the way God provides manna from heaven to feed

the people. Indeed, the God of the Israelites is distinguished from the gods of the surrounding peoples because the God of the Israelites travels with them wherever they go. The gods of the surrounding cities were generally associated with a single, specific geographical location. A good portion of the duties assigned to the Levite priests relates to transporting the tabernacle tent and the accouterments of the tabernacle, enabling God to travel with the people in the wilderness.

And in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, we have the ultimate expression of the love of God, who reached into our human context and became one of us, experiencing all that it is to be human while still retaining the divinity of God's nature. The decision of Christ to participate in John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins represents an act of solidarity with all of humankind. It is an expression of the humility of Christ's nature. It is the manifestation of God bending down to encounter humankind, to understand what it

means to be fully human. At the same time, it is the prime example of humankind being lifted up to fellowship with God, the creator. It's a statement that says maybe we are not so different after all, and – if that's the case, if God and humankind are as similar as this action implies – then maybe our human differences are smaller than we believe them to be.

This spirit of solidarity is the same spirit that I have found embodied in the mission of Presbyterian Welcome. You see, I was raised in quite a conservative Christian environment. I arrived at my stance on LGBT issues by personalizing the issue, by thinking about it in the context of my children and realizing that I would not want either of my children to be treated any differently were one of them to come out. That is the context that I brought with me to Presbyterian Welcome, but after working with them for the last six months, they have opened my eyes to many dimensions of their work. It is work that takes a stand of solidarity with those who have been

mistreated or told that they are somehow less because of their sexuality. It is work that seeks to bring a voice to the voiceless in the context of the PCUSA. It is work that seeks to heal those who have been hurt, regardless of where they stand with respect to LGBTQ issues, because we recognize that there is plenty of hurt to go around. It is work that recognizes that there are many ways to connect with God and to connect with each other, and the traditional church does not necessarily have a monopoly on those ways of connecting. It is work that seeks to break down the walls that we build up between us because of our differences and our fears about those differences. It is even work that seeks to prevent the building of those walls in the first place in the lives of our youth. It is work that seeks to change the world, most of all by being the change that we want to see in the world. You see, in the end, the LGBT issue is not a question of sexuality; it is a question of humanity. The work of Presbyterian Welcome is work that

cries out, work that says, “We are the same, you and I. We are human, with all our strengths and weaknesses, with all our faults and foibles. We may have our differences, but we have much in common. We are more alike than not.” The life, death, and resurrection of Christ demonstrates God’s love for us, but the baptism of Christ demonstrates that even most holy God, our creator, finds some element of common ground with our humanity. If God can overcome the differences between God and mankind, surely we can overcome the petty fears and differences between us as human beings, as well.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.