

Bonded To God
Matthew 3:1-2, 13-17
January 9, 2011

I.

Sermons frequently discuss our relationships with God. And in many cases they call us to do specific things to strengthen and deepen that relationship. We know they include coming to church, prayer, reading the Bible, and fellowship with other Christians. No big surprise there.

Sometimes, however, it is useful to take a step back and think about things God has done for us and what they mean. I would like to do that today. And so today's sermon will not challenge us to go out and do anything. It will not call us to further action. Instead, I hope we can sit back and consider the blessings we have as part God's plan for us.

Two stories in the Bible completely and eternally link us with God. The first tells of when we were created in God's image on the sixth day of creation (Ge. 1:26, 31). And theologians have different ideas about what that means.

Some say God looks like us. You have seen classical art depicting a fierce and powerful old man in the clouds. Others say God's image refers to God's life-giving spirit that is in us all as long as we are alive. And still others believe God's image is the eternal soul we have at birth that that lives on after death.

But whatever we think it means, the mark of God's creation is part of us, and that is a sacred thing. He knew us while we still were in the womb (Jer. 1:5). Our lives are his, now and eternally. That's the first way we are linked to God. We are created in his image, and while we might now know exactly what that means, it is a wonderful and comforting thought.

The other way in which we are forever connected to God is through the baptism of Jesus, which is described in today's Gospel reading. And to set the stage for thinking about this momentous occasion we might want to go back one week.

Last Sunday's Gospel described how Jesus became lost when he was twelve years old, and Mary and Joseph found him at the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus explained that he had to go to his Father's house. And it was clear that he meant God the Father; his Father (Lk. 2:49). He was not speaking of Joseph. Jesus claimed divinity as God's Son when he was twelve.

Today's Gospel is the next thing we hear about Jesus. He now was thirty years old (Lk. 3:23) and was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. And God's voice boomed from heaven and confirmed what Jesus already had told Mary and Joseph at the temple eighteen years earlier. God said "This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased."

And don't we wish the Bible tells us something about those intervening eighteen years of Jesus' life? We can only speculate about what he thought and did as he grew up. But it is clear that during those eighteen years Jesus already knew he was the Son of God, and yet he still called upon John to baptize him. That means baptism is central to our relationship with God.

II.

And so this story of Jesus' baptism, which is in all four Gospels, raises an interesting question. Why did Jesus have to be baptized? He knew he was the Son of God, and was without sin. What could baptism add? Wouldn't his teachings, and his miracles, and his death and resurrection speak for themselves?

John the Baptist wondered the same thing. He probably thought Jesus had it all backwards. Jesus should be baptizing John rather than the other way around. John should be the baptizee instead of the baptizer.

But God had reasons for all this, some related to Jesus and some to ourselves. From Jesus' perspective his baptism announced the beginning of his ministry. It represented his anointing by God for the difficult and holy work he would do in the world. And in baptism the Holy Spirit came to strengthen him for that work.

But it didn't end there. Jesus' baptism also has meaning for us in three ways. First, even though he was free from sin, his baptism linked him in solidarity with our sins; with all of the human imperfections and weaknesses that lead us to depart from God's will. His baptism established that our baptisms could cleanse us and help us be more like him.

Second, Jesus' baptism also sanctified our own baptisms and infused them with a holy character for all time. His baptism made our baptisms holy. It changed everything about baptism and every baptism that ever had been done before. His baptism established the foundation for the sacrament of baptism in the church today.

And so, we are baptized because Jesus was baptized. Our baptisms flow directly from his, and they link us to his death and resurrection so that we might have new life in him in this world and the next.

Finally, Jesus' baptism made baptism transformative for us, and by this I mean that when we are baptized something inwardly and internally holy actually happens. It's more than just words and gestures as we stand around the font. We enter into a new state of spiritual life in which we belong to God, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

III.

Many of us, however, probably cannot even recall our baptisms. We were baptized as infants or young children and, even though we have tried to lead the Christian lives that flow from baptism, we might have no memory of that essential first step. And others of us who were baptized later in life might not remember it as an especially life-changing event.

After all, we're here in church, aren't we? We've pretty much done what our baptisms called us to do, haven't we? Producing good fruit now is what's important, isn't it? So why spend time thinking about the seed that was planted long ago?

Well, I would suggest that our spiritual lives can be enriched by a deeper understanding of what really happened to us when we went to the font, or the pool, or the river, and through that holy sacrament became members of the Body of Christ.

When Jesus was baptized the entire Holy Trinity was evident. The Father spoke from the heavens, the Son was in the water, and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove. All three were in the world at the same place at the same time.

We also are baptized in name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and for us the Holy Spirit is transformative and occupies the central role. As the Spirit descended upon Jesus the Spirit also actually enters us, and can take us into a new spiritual life in which we belong to God and become God's children.

I might explain this with an analogy. Christian baptism is similar in certain ways to Christian marriage. The sacramental nature of the baptismal liturgy actually causes something to happen in the same way that the sacred nature of the marriage ceremony actually causes something to happen.

During the marriage ceremony, for example, the priest pronounces that the couple are husband and wife and, schazam! it happens right then. They are not husband and wife until the priest says it, and they are husband and wife immediately after. If something unexpected intervened to stop the rest of the ceremony, the couple still would be married. The words call something into being.

The same thing occurs during baptism. At the conclusion of the ritual, the priest says "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." That's when it happens. You can't see it but it's there. That's when we inwardly receive the Holy Spirit purely through God's grace and the Spirit is sealed within us as a sort of glowing ember.

And we always will have that ember inside us even if we go through periods of unbelief or sin. But merely having the Spirit as an ember is not enough. Having that ember does not automatically mean that we have faith or that we are saved.

That ember of the Spirit, to be truly effective in an outward way, must be fanned into flames so that it acts upon us, and through us, and enables us to live fruitful and abundant lives in Christ. And those flames can appear in a moment, but for most of us they build in a gradually unfolding process. The end result is the same either way.

IV.

So, baptism is at the core of our faith. Even though we might not recall how it happened, it is important that we appreciate what it means. And if we ask the Holy Spirit to lead us, we will have the assurance and peace that comes with our faith. If the Holy Spirit goes before us into the world, we cannot lose our way.

And if the Holy Spirit goes before us, then the words of our own Baptismal Covenant, which might have been spoken for us even before we knew how to speak, can become realities. I pray that those words are never far from our hearts and minds, and I would like to read them now. Here again are the promises of our baptisms by which we are bound to the Lord. They are:

- To continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer.
- To persevere in resisting evil, and, when we fall into sin, to repent and return to the Lord.
- To proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.
- To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.
- To strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every person.

Powerful words. They express strong promises. They confirm that we are members of the Body of Christ. And they are the way to a holy life. *Amen.*