

SermonsC16Epiphany**Isaiah 43:1-7****Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

It's been a few weeks since I've worked on my joke telling skill set. Gery Gerst sent me this one. I think it goes along nicely with the Gospel reading assigned for this Baptism of Our Lord Sunday:

A Jewish businessman in Brooklyn decided to send his son to Israel to absorb some of the culture of the homeland. When the son returned, the father asked him to tell him about his trip. The son said, "Pop, I had a great time in Israel. Oh, and by the way, I converted to Christianity." "Oh, my," said the father. "What have I done?"

He decided to go ask his old friend Jacob what to do. Jake said, "Funny you should ask. I too sent my son to Israel, and he also came back a Christian. Perhaps we should go see the rabbi and ask him what we should do."

So they went to see the rabbi. The rabbi said, "Funny you should ask. I too sent my son to Israel. He also came back a Christian. What is happening to our young people?"

The three of them prayed and explained what had happened to their sons and asked God what to do. Suddenly a voice came loud and clear from Heaven. The Voice said, "Funny you should ask. I, too, sent my Son to Israel...."

Besides giving us a chuckle this morning this joke raises some serious questions about the nature of baptism. First and foremost is the question:

Did Jesus become a Christian when he was baptized?

Perhaps you have always thought of baptism as the religious ritual that “makes Christians.” I know that is how I was raised to think of baptism that way. Sometimes I hear people talk about being “baptized as a Catholic” or “baptized as a Lutheran” or “baptized as a Methodist” as if baptism makes them into that. My response to this is always that as Lutherans “we acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins so baptism doesn’t make you Lutheran or Pentecostal or Catholic. Baptism, I’ve said, makes you Christian. Following that logic, baptism would make Jesus a Christian I suppose.

But, here is the thing. When Jesus is baptized by John in the river Jordan there were no Christians. Christianity did not yet exist. In fact, it would be at least 100 years before the religion known today as Christianity fully emerged from Judaism. So, the answer to that serious question “Did baptism make Jesus a Christian is “No.” No, Jesus did not *become a Christian* when he was baptized.

Now even though the logic in that is pretty obvious. It is decidedly a pretty radical thought. Insofar as the tradition of the church goes, I think, some would consider that thought borderline if not entirely heretical. So, we may need to take a moment to fully absorb it. (pause) I can tell you that when I first considered the notion that Jesus baptism wasn’t a “Christian baptism” it took me a bit by surprise and created a mild sense of dread. Even though I first realized the historical logic in it, the thought was still rather uncomfortable.

With some amount of trepidation, though, I ran with the thought though. In fact, I’ve run with it for many years. And, in doing that some interesting and powerful insights began to surface. For one thing, my interest in baptism as a “ticket to heaven after I die” or a “Club Christian membership card” declined. I began to consider more seriously and identify with what happened to Jesus *following* his baptism.

The first thing I noticed was that at his baptism the power of the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus. In the rite of baptism we acknowledge that the very same thing happens to each of us. But, how seriously do we take that? Jesus took it very seriously. He went out and began to change the world around him. Realizing and invoking the power of God that had descended upon him he leaned into it, loved into it, embraced that power and lived it. He went out and used that power to bring healing to others. He went out and used that power to form and build community. He went out and used that power to bring justice to the oppressed. He acted, he spoke, he shared and touched and loved and cared for others. He did all of this ... knowing ... knowing that he was a pipeline ... a conduit ... of the formidable dynamic energy of the LORD of all Creation

The second thing that I recognized was that Jesus embraced the identity of “Beloved.” As recorded in the Gospels, we see Jesus living a life in which he courageously trusts in that identity. Only one who knows they are truly and deeply the *Beloved of God* can risk abandoning what is familiar ... what is secure ... what is “trustworthy” in this world ... in exchange for what is everlasting and only fully known in the Kingdom of God. Only one who truly knows that they are *Beloved of God* can exchange the tangible realities of the present for the infinite possibilities of the eternal. He tested that identity by taking risks, not crazy risks ... like throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple but reasonable risks like leaving his old life behind and going on the road.

The third thing that I noticed ... when I let go of the notion that baptism is about club membership or tickets to heaven ... was that Jesus didn’t head straight to the cross following his baptism. There was a process, an evolution if you will in his relationship with God the Father and with his fellow human beings. In the beginning of his ministry Jesus was not actually that much different from prophets and miracle workers who had preceded him. There were others before him who healed the sick and even raised the dead. There were others who promoted justice and freedom for the oppressed. But, as Jesus lived those three years

between his baptism and his crucifixion and resurrection ... he grew in intimate identification with God as Forgiving and Re-Creating Father. Jesus also grew in merciful solidarity with humankind. He grew to the point where, in the end, all that remained was trust in God and forgiveness even of those who had betrayed him.

In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "Anybody living in the strength of Christ's baptism lives in the strength of Christ's death."

In what has been called by some *The Age of Entitlement* we Christians are often inclined to celebrate our baptism by remembering the *promise of benefits* - the forgiveness of sins and eternal life - we receive. We are less inclined to embrace the *promise of the work* ... the life of sacrificial ministry ... that we are commissioned to as ones beloved of God the Father.

That has to change.

(pause)

If we are truly interested in growing in faith and participating in the advancement of the Kingdom of God we need to move away from asking questions about what happens *to us* in baptism. Instead, we need to more and more ask this question:

What do I do with my baptism?

Jesus baptism would have made no difference in the world if he had not followed up on it by diving into the deep end of his relationship with God the Father. His baptism would have been a dead end if he had not embarked upon a life of devoted service and sacrifice in the world. Jesus did not become known in his baptism; his baptism became known in him. His baptism didn't work "on him" it worked itself out "in and through him."

If we are to truly be his followers, can it be any different for us?

If you really take a look at Jesus' baptism and the result of his baptism you will notice that it wasn't something that generated a comfortable complacency. Far from it! Jesus baptism brought restlessness, action, commitment, courageous risk taking and a movement away from what was safe, secure and familiar. It brought sacrifice but with that sacrifice came an even greater reward: transformation.

Jesus did a lot with his baptism!

What about you?

What about yours?

AMEN