



# First United Church of Oak Park

## One Baptism

Luke 3: 15-22

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Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

The four Gospels often diverge significantly on important details of Jesus' life. Some events are told only in one of the Gospels, some in two or more. The most central facets of Jesus' life and ministry, though, are told in different forms in all four Gospels. It's not that many that fall into that category. Christ was crucified, and rose from the dead—that is told in all four Gospels. That he shared a final Passover meal with the disciples, instituting what Christians call the Lord's Supper or communion—that is told in all four Gospels. And also, Christ was baptized; that is told in all four Gospels.

But the baptism of Christ, it is kind of a problem. What I mean is that it raises the uncomfortable question, why was Jesus baptized at all? Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. Okay, John was baptizing a lot of people. In fact, in the passage we read today there were a whole host of other people who had been baptized just before Jesus. People who were there to repent and be forgiven of sins. What did Jesus share in common with them? And secondly, since Jesus is undoubtedly a more central figure for Christians than John, who is John to be baptizing Jesus? What can this lesser figure add to Jesus, that Jesus could not simply do himself? Why is Jesus being baptized at all?

It's not merely me who finds these questions uncomfortable. The Gospel authors themselves are evidently quite uncomfortable. The Gospel of Matthew practically ties itself in knots, with John the Baptist saying to Jesus—you should be the one to baptize me. But Jesus insists—you must baptize me because it is necessary to fulfill all righteousness. Okay, fine, it's necessary to fulfill all righteousness. But it's not clear at all what that means. The Gospel of John goes even further: it omits the event almost in its entirety, telling only the part about the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus—it doesn't even mention the River Jordan. Why was Jesus being baptized at all? It's an uncomfortable question, a question the authors of the Gospels were uncomfortable with.

It is the nature of this sort of thing that the answer can only be understood retrospectively. The importance of the event can only be understood because of what occurs as a result of it. And the results of Christ's baptism, those we can figure out. The very first thing that happens after Jesus is baptized is that a voice comes from the

heavens declaring, this is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased. This establishes with an authority no lesser than the voice of God Jesus' identity as child of God and beloved of God. That is the first thing Christ's baptism accomplishes, establishing absolutely Christ's identity, the core of who he is.

The second thing that results from Christ's baptism is that it inaugurates Christ's ministry. Every one of Christ's miraculous healings, every one of his gracious words, every act of rebellion against unjust powers--they all trace back to Christ's baptism. Christ's ministry is like a great and wide river delta spreading out into an ocean of humanity, branching in every direction. And the point that this spread begins, the mouth of the delta, it is Christ's baptism. It all flows from this moment, fed and refreshed and empowered by that Holy Spirit infused-day on the Jordan River.

Why was Christ baptized? Well, the importance of Christ's baptism must be understood retrospectively, that is by looking at what resulted from the event. And what resulted is two twinned happenings—his baptism established with absolute certainty Christ's identity as beloved child of God, pleasing in God's sight. And the second cannot be separated from the first: Christ began his ministry of grace and healing and resistance to injustice. Christ's identity and Christ's ministry. They are inseparable. The power of Christ's ministry is fed and refreshed and empowered by his identity as beloved child of God.

And this brings us back to one other detail of Christ's baptism, that can only be understood retrospectively. Jesus was just one of many people baptized that day. John the baptizer was baptizing a lot of people. They all shared the same baptism. The grace and power of Christ's baptism, they shared in that. It's even more radical than that. And every person baptized since that day, we all share that same baptism, too. In Christian tradition we say that we share in Christ's baptism.

The truths of Christ's baptism: they are for you, too. You are a beloved child of God, pleasing in the sight of God. The voice of God has said so. Whatever stories you might have been told about your worth because of what you look like, who you love, what's in your bank account, what your job title is: those cannot hold a candle to your identity in baptism. The very voice of God tells the story of who you are—you are a beloved child of God, well pleasing in God's sight. Everything else about how you understand who you are, let it flow like a river delta out from that one unchangeable truth, a truth vouchsafed by the voice of God.

And with that identity sure and certain, you also have all that you need to share, too, in Christ's ministry. Grace, healing, resistance to injustice, you have all that you need to accomplish this. You are empowered by the mark of Christ's baptism upon you.

And that is something much needed in the world. There is a world of hurt out there in need of healing; I don't need to convince you of that with some litany of evils. Of the

need for grace and healing and resistance to injustice, that need is obvious. The problem is, who has the strength these days? Having been worn down by troubles that seem evergreen, where can strength be found to do those things?

There is our baptism. I have some homework for you. Sometime in the next day, when you next shower or even when you next wash your hands, remember your baptism. Remember that you have been baptized into Christ's baptism. Let the water flow down your face, and remember the voice of God proclaiming—you are my beloved child, in you I am well pleased. You are my beloved child, in you I am well pleased. You are my beloved child, in you I am well pleased. Let your life flow from that place. Remember that you have been baptized. And if you have not been baptized, please know that those waters are open to you. You can be baptized; I would be happy to do so.

Why was Jesus baptized—I don't know. If the Gospels don't agree then I'm surely not going to come up with some clean answer for all time. But what I can say is thank God that Jesus was baptized. Because I need it so much to be true. Thanks be to God.