

**Matthew 3:1-17**

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup>‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’<sup>3</sup>This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”’

<sup>4</sup>Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup>and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup>Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham and Sarah as our ancestors”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>10</sup>Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>11</sup> ‘I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup>John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

Catholic theologian Herbert McCabe says, “The whole of our faith is the belief that God loves us; I mean there isn't anything else. Anything else we say we believe is just a way of saying that God loves us...This is all of theology: trying to comprehend and live into that God loves us.”<sup>1</sup>

Just like a developing baby needs not just food and drink, but also to know that they are loved by their parents. In fact, some infants, when they aren't held and cuddled, have refused food and drink – we know that when infants aren't held and cuddled, they will not grow and develop in the same way as other children. The whole of our faith is the belief that God loves us; I mean there just isn't anything else.

Jesus showed up at the Jordan River to be baptized by John. The place was overflowing with sinners – the sorry, the guilty; those who were uncertain and ashamed – people who hoped against hope that perhaps John could cleanse them and help turn their lives around.

In the office at Corpus Christi (Boise's homeless day shelter) we sometimes (a bit embarrassingly) spend some time in the office scanning the Ada County Sheriff's website, seeing who has been arrested. I think it started from times when we hadn't seen someone for awhile, not sure where they were, we would scan the faces of those on the jail roster to see if they were there. Or, sometimes this happens just when it is a slow day. It is a bit disconcerting to scan that jail list from time to time, to see how many people in one day have been arrested for committing burglary, assault, or domestic violence. But then as you are looking down that list and you see a face you recognize – you see a face that you are fond of, perhaps even a person you love – that sort of shakes you out of that easy black and white way of thinking that these are the pictures of

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Herbert McCabe, *Faith Within Reason*, (London: Continuum, 2007), 33.

the bad or evil. It is a reminder that this is not the whole of who they are, even though we often want to define people by the worst thing they have ever done. It is a reminder that these are, like all of us, pictures of wounded people.

Anyway, that is the line of people I imagine waiting at the edge of the river to be baptized by John, those faces on the Ada Country arrest report. Not all of them, not the ones who think it wasn't their fault, or what they did wasn't really that bad (lots of people have done worse), or that they are just getting screwed by the system. But those who are willing to painfully admit to themselves that they have done something wrong – that they have hurt someone, that they have caused pain to another – perhaps to someone who was innocent, or even worse, perhaps to someone they love.

I imagine it is these folks who are willing to walk all the way out to the wilderness to find John and wait in line for the hope of his baptismal waters – for his words of repentance and forgiveness – for his message that they can turn their lives around, those who know they have done some messing up; those who know they have caused some pain. Those who know they needed something different, something new. These are the people who stand at the edge of the Jordan river.

Then, into this scene of sinners walks Jesus, the one of whom the old creed says was “without sin.” This was the beginning of his public life, so he wasn't really known before this. In fact in the gospel of Mark, this is the first story – the story begins here, with Jesus being baptized by John. Jesus comes there to that wilderness, to that place where so many guilty have gathered. He does not condemn them. He does not add any extra words of judgment or take a

moment to recognize how superior he is to this lot. He simply gets in line. He takes his place in line and waited his turn to see John. I guess we could say that Jesus starts his public ministry in the same way that it ends, in the company of those who know they are sinners.

Nadia Bolz Weber points out that, not once did Jesus affirm the faith of one who thought they were in pretty good shape and not really that much in need of Jesus. Not once did Jesus affirm the faith of one who thought they were in good shape – that is a disturbing word for me to hear.

Historically the Christian church has never been too comfortable with the baptism of Jesus. It has always been a little unclear why Jesus needed baptism since, as we say, he was without sin. He could have simply have stood on shore and offered words of encouragement to those going into the water, or held out his hand to those who struggled out of the river in their heavy wet clothes. But he did not set himself apart or think he was too good or righteous or different from those waiting in that baptismal line. He just got in line with them.

We certainly spend a lot of time in the church talking about God's love for sinners, but we also usually go out of our way to try and not be mistaken for them or associated with them. I always feel a little sheepish and offended when someone comes into the shelter and mistakes me for a homeless guest (my mom would recommend getting a haircut). Only Jesus, the one whom we claim to follow, he did not seem too concerned about being mistaken for sinners or the unclean. He just got in line with those who knew they had a wound in need of cleansing – those who knew that they had wounded others.

And then, as the story goes, the most amazing thing happened. After Jesus got out of that river, the heavens opened up – the fun part of the story – and the Spirit descended like a dove and a voice from the heavens said, “this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.” What I find interesting about this is that this is the beginning. Jesus hasn’t really done anything yet except get in that line. Jesus hasn’t confronted Satan in the wilderness, performed any miracles, called one disciple, or preached one sermon. He hasn’t accomplished anything that we know of. He hasn’t changed one life. He hasn’t done one thing to earn God’s love. And still, right there in the text we are told that there at the Jordan river the sky opens up and a voice from heaven declared, “this is my child who I love; this is my child who I am so proud of.” He didn’t have to earn that remark because the God of the Universe is simply in love with us, there just isn’t anything else.

I don’t know why Jesus got in that line. I don’t know why Jesus decided to be baptized. Maybe to be a symbol for us. Maybe to fulfill some religious obligation. Maybe because he didn’t think himself to be “without sin.” It could be that even Jesus had wounds to lay down: the wounds of the past; the wounds of family; the wounds of loss; the wounds of high expectations. Maybe at the outset of his own journey, he just needed to be reminded that the God of the Universe was in love with him – that no matter what successes or failures were about to come, nothing was going to change. So he got in that line. Perhaps at the outset of his ministry, he needed to be reminded of God’s love for him, even if he failed to be as faithful as he hoped he could be.

Perhaps he just didn't see himself as all that different from all the others in that line. All wounded people. All people who had been hurt and caused hurt. All people who were deeply loved by God.

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If this is true, then much of our job is to help people know this truth about themselves, that the God of the Universe is in love with them. Part of our job for 2019 is to be the voice from the heavens saying, “you are my beloved sister – you are my beloved brother.” Part of our vocation as God's beloved children is to be a people who communicate that very love to others, to be God's megaphone of love. When we feel our anger or judgment welling up, let us remember the Jesus who did not stand in judgment, but got in the baptismal line with sinners. Or as Father Greg Boyle says, to be a people who “stand in awe of what people have to carry, rather than in judgment at how they carry it.”

A week ago, and sorry to all you Chicago Bears fans for bringing this up, a week ago the Chicago Bears kicker, Cody Parker missed a 43-yard field goal that would have won them the game and advanced them in the football playoffs. He hit the left upright and their season was over. And as he walked off the field, this is what he heard [here I played a short clip of Parker being booed by Chicago fans as he left the field at the end of the game].

I don't know anything about Cody Parker, but perhaps that was the worst moment of his life. I am sure it was the worst professional moment of his life. His greatest professional failure. And in his feeling like a failure, that feeling was compounded by a chorus of "boos".

My senior year of high school, like many high-school athletes, I had high hopes of being a State Champion in wrestling. I put a ridiculous amount of hours into that hope, and did not eat many Christmas cookies in the pursuit of that goal. The week of the state tournament I remember saying to my mom, "I know that I have no life perspective, but this is the biggest week of my life." And it was.

And I was fortunate enough to make it to the semi-finals, if I won I would be in the state finals, it would be televised and everything. If I lost, the best I would be able to do is 3<sup>rd</sup> place. And, I lost. And as I walked off the mat, trying to hold back my tears – their waiting for me were two of my teammates. And my teammate Sam hugged me and said, "It's okay Spanky, we still love you."

Twenty-one years later, I starkly remember that moment where I felt like such a failure – when it felt like everything I had worked for just fell flat – there were Sam and Josh, like the voice of God saying, "We love you. We are proud of you." I don't think it would have hit me any more powerfully if the roof of the Bob Devany Sports Center would have opened up and a voice would have cried out, "this is my beloved son."

I hold these stories together to illustrate the point that we all have this daily choice – as we see those around us stumble, in big and small ways – as we interact with those who fail to live up to

our own expectations or hopes – we can choose to join the chorus of boos. Or, we can seek to be the voice of God at the edge of the river, at the edge of the mat, “this is my beloved child.”

*The whole of our faith is the belief that God loves us; I mean there isn't anything else.* May we be the megaphone of this message to the world. Amen.