

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
January 10, 2016

First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

... when Jesus had also been baptized and was praying, 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." (Luke 3:21-22 N.R.S.V.)

Who Am I?

In preaching, the really good ideas get recycled a lot. So the idea for this sermon is based on an article in *Pulpit Resources* by William H. Willimon. Willimon says he borrowed the idea from a book, *Remember Who You Are: Baptism, a Model for Christian Life*, Nashville, The Upper Room. (*Pulpit Resources*, Jan. 2016, pp. 9-12)

One of the most terrifying questions to me when I was a teenager was this one: "What are you going to be when you grow up?" For me that question was about career or vocation and the scary part was that I had no idea what I wanted to be or do when I grew up.

Today the pressure is even more intense for our young people. There is great pressure to decide what career path you are going to follow so that you can gear your schooling accordingly. I think the pressure is overdone, but there is some truth there as well. I have a nephew who spent 12 years in college because he couldn't decide what he wanted to do and kept changing majors and dropping classes.

The question, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" is really about more than just career or vocation. It is about your identity, your hopes and goals in life.

So here's the thing. If you don't know who you are, there are all kinds of voices that will tell you who you are.

"Who am I?" If you listen to the movies, soap operas, and songs, they will tell you that you are mostly a sexual being. You are someone to lust and be lusted after. Your body is your most precious possession. Nurture it, love it, display it, show it off.

"Who am I?" If you listen to intellectually elite, they will tell you that you are mostly a brain. You are a rational, thinking, reasoning being; absorbing facts and figures, going to endless school. They will tell you that it is not who you are that is important, but what you know.

“Who am I?” If you listen to the financial experts you are mostly a maker and spender of money. They will tell you that your goal in life should be a house in the suburbs with a two car garage and a forty year mortgage .

“Who am I?” Other voices will tell you that you are “a self-centered, autonomous, self-made being.” Your most important goal in life is look after yourself. “Because if you don’t do it, nobody else will.”

In our scripture for today we find a different kind of answer to the age old question of “Who am I?” Jesus is baptized by John. The Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove and a voice from heaven announces, “You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

I want you to note that Jesus was about 30 years old at the time of his baptism. He had not yet began his ministry. He hadn’t done anything to earn God’s favor. Yet God still says, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

Here is the good news, and it really is good news for us. When we are baptized as Jesus was baptized, we too are given the same kind of assurance from God. Who am I? You are the much loved son or daughter of the creator of the universe. Even before you can do anything one way or the other, God already loves you and is pleased with you. That is why we baptize our children. The promise and love of God comes to us first even before we are old enough to respond.

We don’t earn the favor of God by being baptized. Instead, regardless of how old we are when we are baptized, we receive God’s grace and favor as a free gift. It is the best of news. You are the much loved son or daughter of God, with you God is well pleased.

In baptism we are also given a new name. That name is Christian. In former times and traditions the child or convert being presented for baptism was given his or her Christian name at that point. Sometime this was called christening.

If I could chase a rabbit for just a moment, I remember as a little boy asking my dad, “Dad, what will my name be when I grow up?” He just smiled and said, “It will still be John.”

I remember that because I thought that becoming an adult was such a big change in identity that I ought to have a new name to go with the new identity. I have since discovered that a number of cultures actually do that. In those cultures when a boy or girl reaches the age of adult, he or she gives up their child name and takes on an adult name.

So back to where I was, baptism is a far bigger event and change than merely reaching a certain chronological age. - the one called adult. We no longer give babies or new converts a different personal name at baptism, but God does bestow upon us a new identity and a new name. From that point on we have the name and identity of Christian.

That doesn’t mean that our spiritual growth ends with baptism. Baptism is just the beginning.

God's hope for us, God's dream for us is that we will continue to grow closer and closer to him all our lives.

Now listen, this is important. At baptism we receive the full force of God's love. God's favor rests upon us and nothing that we can ever do in life will make God love us anymore. Nothing we can ever fail to do can make God love us any less. Isn't that amazing?! God's love can't be earned. It can only be received.

Of course we still sin after we are baptized. Baptism is only the beginning of the journey we are on with Christ. Yes, when we sin, God is upset with us, not so much because we have failed him, but because God knows we deserve better. Our sin hurts those around us and our sin hurts us. God wants better for us, far, far better. So we seek every day to grow more and more into our baptism and into the name that God freely gives us. "Christian," God says, "You are my beloved, child, with you I am well pleased."

Our God given identity is not just something to receive and then forget about. Our baptismal identity strengthens and helps us every day of our lives.

I am going to make a bit of a shift, so stay with me. There is something that I have always admired about the Marine Corps. I never joined the Marines. I went into the Air Force instead. But I have always admired the sense of esprit de corps that the Marines have. You have probably heard it said that there is no such thing as an ex-marine. I was in the Air Force, now. I am not. But the marines carry that identity with them into civilian life. Once a marine, always a marine! That identity is a source of strength for them when they face difficult times.

In baptism, God freely gives us a far more powerful and precious gift of identity. The Christian message is not that we should try to act as if we are somebody. The Christian message is that we are somebody. Wherever we go, whatever we are doing, we are baptized. We are royalty - children of the king. We are the much loved, forgiven, and spirit powered children of God.

The great Christian reformer, Martin Luther was often seen lifting his hand and touching his forehead. When he struggled with doubts, worries, and stresses, he would touch his forehead and remind himself. "Martin, be calm, you are baptized."

I know that many of us here this morning are hiding difficult struggles behind our smiling faces. It might be family problems, money problems, health problems or any number of doubts, worries and stresses. So I invite you, as the music plays to come forward, dip your hand in the waters of the baptismal font, touch your forehead and remind yourself. "John, be calm, you are baptized." "Bill, be calm, you are baptized." "Mary, be calm, you are baptized."

Amen.

