

Message – The Baptism of Our Lord
January 8-9, 2011
Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

Pre-eminent psychologist Eric Erickson suggests that healthy human beings move through eight stages of development from birth to adulthood. Each stage beginning with trust, born into us at infancy, to independence and purpose in childhood, to competency and confidence in adolescence, to cooperation and compassion in adulthood, Erickson claims, forms our identity.

Last evening and today six beautiful children of God begin the most important step in forming their identity. Last night Charlie and Leah (Lee-ah) and this morning, Shane, Dana, Molly and Drew will be welcomed into the body of Christ through the sacrament of baptism.

This week we met for a couple of hours to talk about who we are in our baptism. We remember that baptism is more than the forgiveness of sins, as John the Baptist reminds us in the lesson today. Baptism is a life lived in the family of Christ.

We're renamed as Christians. Christians are united one to another. Christians need one another. So we take care of one another. We celebrate with one another and hold onto one another when times are not so joyous.

In the waters of baptism our life is washed in the promise of the Holy Spirit. In that Holy Spirit, promised to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, is God's most precious gift to us; the gift of grace, God's favor upon us.

So, this week, these baptismal households were brave and honest in their answers to questions around living a life in response to our baptism. They've given me permission to share their answers with you to the best of my recollection.

These young households are busy and active, serving faithfully and lovingly as parents, children of aging parents, as siblings, spouses, and in their vocations. Their responsibilities are great. But, somewhere along the line, these folks, along with all of you, decided that living a baptized life was critical to their identity.

They expressed their identity this way: They want to spend time living in a community of other believers. Living in response to their baptism, they commented, holds them accountable. "There isn't much to be accountable for these days," one astute young father mentioned. "Of course we're accountable to our marriage, and our family and our job; but if we're in a community of people who are trying to do the right thing, trying to live a faithful life, there's accountability. We make choices. It's easy to make choices. Living a baptized life helps us make the right choices."

One father mentioned he's grateful for the discipline of regular worship, prayer and study promised in our baptismal covenant.

“Baptism gives us a foundation,” another family member mentioned. “The Holy Spirit, surrounding us, helps us to know that we’re not alone, that we can trust in God and that can give thanks each day for God’s saving, loving power in our lives, and that is reassuring.”

Each night when we met, our time of meeting was right at the dinner hour. So, I’m grateful for how these very devoted families came, with all their children, to spend time digging deep into their hearts for answers to questions probably not asked of them very often.

One young mom, doing her very best to pay attention with two young children crawling over her and her husband, offered up the most profound baptism theology I’ve ever heard. “In my baptism I know that God just loves me, more than anything. God just loves me, more than anything! And that gives me peace.”

Now, in Matthew’s gospel, which we hear from today, the very first lines of the gospel start with Jesus’ identity. The gospel begins with his family tree, a genealogy that stems back to the great patriarch, Abraham and King David. So, right away we’re getting the picture of Jesus’ strong lines to God’s chosen people, Israel, and to his kingship as a descendant of David.

In fact, these people were so certain of their identity as God’s chosen, as God’s most sacred flock, they viewed baptism necessary for only those coming into the faith, converts, not the children of Abraham, promised God’s saving grace.

Matthew’s writer wants us to know that a new king is on the way. Claiming identity from Abraham is not enough. This new king, is God with us in a burning passion. He will save us from our sins. Baptizing with the Holy Spirit, he’s one so great, he ignites the kingdom of God within each of us. Jesus will put everything in its true and proper place, putting all right with God.

Today’s reading from Matthew is Jesus’ first, adult, public appearance. Immediately, his identity is made known. In contrast to the harsh warnings of John, in Jesus we meet a humble encourager, a trusting partner joined with God in a journey of love and grace. Emerging from the baptismal waters, God identifies Jesus as his beloved, and favor is found with him.

There is a man, who ministers to young men in the prison system. He spends his days visiting, teaching and sharing the bible. Each visit reinforces one common thread sewn throughout all the inmates: they do not feel loved; they do not feel worthy of love.

Shortly after the man began his ministry he discovered that he would need to tell his story, explain to the inmates how he identifies himself.

As a young man he was a disappointment to his parents, teachers and friends. Every failure was reinforced by the world around him. Soon he became imprisoned in his unworthiness.

After some time, the man, in listening to God's words at Jesus' baptism, came to realize that the words for Jesus, are for him as well; that no matter how he disappoints, God loves him, God finds favor in him; that Jesus comes, lives and dies for us, is born again for us so that we too may be born again, in the love of God.

His realization of his identity as God's most beloved, changed his life and changed his teaching. He shared with the men the story of Jesus' baptism and God's words spoken from the heavens, "this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Ministering to the prisoners, the man walked among the crowded room and standing in front of each young man he offered up the words, "you are God's beloved," to each tear faced young man staring up at him.

We claim our identity by what we believe, what we know to be true. Just after Christmas I attended a funeral celebrating the rich and fulfilling life of a friend born in Wales, who came to live in the United States after World War II to marry the love of her life. One of the happiest days of her life was in her later life when she became a naturalized citizen.

With her strong British accent, which she never lost, she loved calling herself an American. Whenever we'd meet she always had words to say to us natural born citizens. "You Americans," she'd always say, "you live in the greatest country in the world. You have no idea what freedom and privilege you have. You don't appreciate what it means to call yourself an American."

When my friend became an American citizen, she swore to certain statements that she was willing to uphold in proclaiming her identity. She didn't take these statements lightly. She studied hard, and with commitment the privilege of calling herself an American. Then she practiced her new identity. Her new identity did not promise her an easy road. It did promise her, though, conviction. She knew who she was and she claimed her identity with a fierce passion. So, when she had to weather the difficult storms, she trusted in the security of her identity. Some things had to go by the wayside. Some things came easily, like the privilege of a strong, solid education. Some things did not come so easily, such as letting go of her former life in Great Britain.

Today, as we stand on the banks of the Jordan River, about to witness the baptism of our newest Christians, I wonder, do we have any idea what it means to be a Christian? How do we claim and live the perfect love and grace that comes from Jesus Christ?

This week, the households of these newly baptized have been practicing their statements of belief. We're going share in these statements in just a few moments as a reminder of our own baptism and what we believe.

We believe in a God almighty, immense, awesome; a God who is our friend, our companion along the way; a God so great the heavens cannot contain this God; a God *who stretches the spangled heavens...who flung the suns in burning radiance through the silent fields of space*; and yet, a God so present, our every breath is God's spirit upon us and within us. This God who loves us so immensely, he chooses to come to us as one of us and give his life for us, marking us and sealing us in his undying love for us, calling us to be his covenant people, bearing witness to justice with gentleness, kindness, compassion, righteousness and love.

Now, for many of you here, you're distracted and thinking about a lot of things other than what it means to claim our identity in our baptism. Children are excited. There are family gatherings to host after this blessed event. So, listening to this message is probably pretty low on your list of priorities right now. And that's ok. It's a simple message. I'm almost done.

Most of us carry or wear some kind of mark or symbol that identifies us. Our driver's license, our school jackets, our rings on our fingers. Jesus navigates the journey of life with one sign: the mark of God's love forever sealed upon him and within him. This mark is for us; the sign of the cross, given to us in our baptism, where we are marked and sealed as Christ's own forever.

So now, one last thing. Stop for just a moment. Take your thumb to your forehead and make the sign of the cross. Go forth, and remember always the gift of your identity, you are God's, marked and sealed in Christ, beloved, and with whom he is well pleased. Amen.