

## MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### Watermarked

Luke 3: 21-22

I am a little nervous to even bring up the subject of water these days. Mother Nature has been overwhelming us with water in the past few years with tsunamis, hurricanes, and torrential downpours leading to devastating mudslides. Enough with the water already. Yet, water is one of the powerful images in the Bible that continues to inform us even today. As we prepare for the Lenten Journey that begins on this Wednesday, it seems the perfect time to consider the image of water to refresh and renew our spirit and to remind us just who we really are.

I could not wait to see the mighty Jordan River when Randy and I went to Israel in 1992. I had an image in my mind of a river like the great Mississippi River - a large moving body of water; a source of pleasure and commerce. I knew it would not be as large as the Nile, of course, but still worthy in its own right.

The day we arrived at the Jordan, it had been raining. We walked from the parking lot down to the river itself and the sky cleared and the rain stopped. We went to the edge of the Jordan River. It is not very wide, brush is growing all along the banks, and a few fallen trees and branches were sticking out of the water. It appeared that where we were standing was the wide point in the river. I was underwhelmed by the size of the river. It was not at all what I expected. I told myself that through the centuries, the river has changed and certainly matured. So, I stood by myself on the banks of the river and tried to see back through time in my mind's eye. I wrote in my journal that once you began to open yourself to the experience... "It is easy to imagine stepping off the banks into the river for baptism. Probably a cold experience in January, but picturesque at any time."

The size of the river was not what mattered. I was standing where Jesus had stood. I was looking at the body of water that John the Baptist used to pave the way for Jesus' arrival. I was surrounded by water and by spirit. Though the river was not what I expected, the experience was overwhelming. I sat down on the bank in the wet grass just to soak in the moment. In the process, I remember having a strong sense of who I am - that I too am known by name by the Divine; that I too am a child of God. The river may not be large, but the experience was mighty.

Jesus knew that John the Baptist was teaching, preaching and preparing the way for the Messiah. John spoke to a people who had become so focused on the dogma of their religion; they had grown away from the spirit of their faith. The rules and regulations of their experience had become an obstacle to their love relationship with God. John called for the people to repent, to turn back to God wholeheartedly. It is written that John preached the

good news of one who would come with water and spirit. That one – Jesus of Nazareth. John was a reformer. He did indeed pave the way, but in the process he would threaten the ruling authority, Herod. Before he is imprisoned however, Jesus would greet John at the Jordan River, Jesus would wade into the water of the Jordan River and be baptized. John was reluctant to participate, of that we are sure, but Jesus insists. And when Jesus came up and out of the water, the eye witnesses declare that a voice from heaven was heard to say, “this is my son with whom I am well pleased.” Jesus’ identity - child of God. Your identity, my identity – child of God.

Identity Theft is a real threat these days. You hear horror stories about identity theft all the time. A criminal uses another’s personal information. In the process one can take from another social security numbers, credit card numbers, bank account numbers, and participate in mail fraud, spend lots of money and wreak havoc in the name of the victim. When I typed in the words, “identity theft” in the internet search engine Yahoo, I got thousands of responses. Obviously, I did not look into all those responses, but clearly this is a hot issue. According to FBI statistics, identity theft is the fastest growing crime in America.

Now I do not want to dismiss in any way the seriousness of identity theft. Having someone pose in our place is despicable and the damage following devastating. Identity theft is a serious crime, but when it comes to our true sense of personal identity, we tend to release it so easily that there is often no need for the word theft.

You may have seen a commercial on television where a teenager is standing in his room and his friends and family come in and out changing his hair, his clothes, placing a cigarette or a beer bottle in his hand, the point is that each one who comes in changes the appearance of this teen to meet their own agenda. Finally, the teen goes back to who he was to begin with and walks away. What is his true identity? Is it based on external pressures or does it grow from deep within?

Are we just what others determine us to be or do we have a strong enough sense of self that we are clear in all circumstances the person we choose to be? All of us are shaped in part by the exterior demands on our lives and the roles that we carry. I have been known to introduce myself based on my relationships--as Randy’s wife or Lori’s mom or Martha Anne’s daughter, but I cannot think of a time when I have initially introduced myself as a child of God.

It is Frederick Buechner who wrote, “We live from the outside in rather than the inside out.” For most of us that is our truth. We live according to external influences in our lives. However, it is the development of self image that is rooted in the love of God that enables us to define ourselves, not by the world’s expectations but by the spirit of the Divine within us. This sense of self rooted in faith according to theologian Howard Thurman is, “the quality of infinite worth” and it is “the priceless ingredient in human life and relations...” Child of God is your identity, it’s my identity and it is shaped by the understanding God holds us with a sense of infinite worth. That’s grace and that is our reality.

Jesus understood his identity was shaped first and foremost by the love of God for him. Jesus then centered his life sharing the love of God in places like Jerusalem, Samaria, Nazareth and everywhere else he traveled.

Our personal worth is rooted in God's love not our accomplishments. Yet, in so much of what is practiced in Christianity is not based on God's love but God's judgment. In so doing, much of Christianity is anchored to the backside of the cross a place of one obstacle after another preventing us from experiencing our true self as a child of God.

Focused on the love of God for us, the truth that we hold great worth in the eyes of the Divine, we then can center **not** on the obstacles in our lives, but on the opportunities to live out our faith. In so doing, we become clear who we are as a child of God.

My own baptism took place down the hallway in the Chapel May 13, 1962. I was eight years old. My memory is that it was a beautiful Sunday afternoon and the Chapel was full of parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters of the many babies that were being baptized. Babies –that's my memory – everyone else being baptized was a baby!

I am not sure why my parents waited for my baptism. I think my brothers were both baptized as infants, but you know how it goes, three kids with a fourth foster child. The house was busy, time slipped by. However, once I got over the fact that the others were all babies – I began to realize the privilege of remembering. I remember the day, I remember some of the words of the liturgy from that day and I remember the powerful sense that I had of being known by name by God that I was a loved by God for eternity. That truth has seen me through each and every day of my life. Through the good, the bad, the ugly and the monotonous!

This Lent could become a journey for each of us to reflect on our own self image and how much we are shaped by the world and how much we are shaped by the spirit of God that lives within. We are born of water and of spirit. How do we live out that reality each day? The Lenten journey to the cross is a journey of liberation, that can bring us a new identity, ultimately a new way of seeing ourselves and living our days.

She was a youth at one of the churches I served in California. She was a typical kid who unfortunately became pregnant at 16. Her parents were devastated and the two families involved began to work through the situation. The young man was a little older, the couple was deeply in love, so it was agreed that they would marry. Before long, of course, the baby arrived, a beautiful little girl. Though it was very difficult, the couple began to create their life together and they both adored this little girl. It was one of those stories that people wrapped their hopes in for a happy ending. Then one afternoon at a large extended family gathering, the little girl now about 18 months was no where to be found. The family searched every inch of the house – she was gone. Two of the grandparents were police officers, so they called for help. The police arrived and of course went first to the above ground outdoor pool. Because the gate was locked and the pool cover still secure, no one had really looked in the pool in the searching process. The police however, opened the gate

first thing, went up the steps to the pool, took off the pool cover and to the horror of everyone, there was this beautiful, vibrant child – dead in the water.

The church was so crowded for the funeral for that child that people were seated out on the patio. It seemed the whole congregation plus many others were there to offer their support to the family.

Days, weeks, months passed and the young couple unable to share their grief together separated and began the process of divorce. It seemed that everyone was lost – the parents and the grandparents – overwhelmed by their feelings of responsibility and grief.

The young mother could not seem to get a grip on her life. In her few conversations with me it is clear that she blamed God for this horrible situation. She felt God punished her for getting pregnant before she was married. Though I tried to offer her an expression of God's love for her, it fell on deaf ears. Because of her anger, her grief and her feelings of abandonment from God, her life began to spiral out of control and in less than a year, she became pregnant again. Only this time, she was in worse shape emotionally than she was at sixteen. Well, the baby is born, another beautiful child and the mother comes to see me about baptism. I am of course, happy to officiate at the baptism, but share that I am not sure that we should do it in this church because the mother has not been back in the sanctuary since the funeral of her first child. She assures me that all that is in the past, she is over her grief and has moved on. I invite her to walk into the sanctuary again with me, but she is sure she does not need to do that.

Sunday comes and at the appropriate moment in the service I invite her to bring the baby up to the altar for baptism. She steps forward and I offer the liturgy and then I ask what name is to be given to this child and I reach for the baby. Only, she does not hand me the baby. She does not say a word, but she begins to clutch the baby as if I am trying to take the child away from her. I begin to speak softly and reassure her, but she is frozen in her spot, clutching this child. She is still absolutely silent. At that point, I am not sure what to do, so I look up thinking I might get one of her parents to come up and help me and I realize that there is not a dry eye in the house. Everyone - every man, woman and child - has tears in their eyes and they are all literally holding their breath. They have watched this young girl grow up and experience terrible trauma and any one of them would have given anything to help her find her way again. It was a moment of desperation, not only for that young mother, but for the whole congregation.

So, I turn my attention back to the mother and child and I tell the mother that I am going to help her to the front pew to sit down for a minute. It is only then that she speaks and she says "No!" I say, "You don't want to sit down?" "No," she says, "I can't." She was standing at the greatest crossroads of her young life and it was not only clear to me, but to the whole congregation. Was she going to give this child to the very God that she blamed for taking her last child? We were all suspended in time. She was not moving. Finally, after what I am sure was only a few minutes, but what felt like an hour, she said, "If she doesn't have God

she doesn't have any hope at all." She looked me straight in the eye, took a deep breath and handed me the baby and gave the baby's full name.

I continued with the liturgy, placing the water on the child's head and reminding the congregation that we are all born of the water and the spirit. As I looked up, I saw that the congregation began standing one, by one. They stood as if in solidarity with that young mother, but also they stood as if they too had made a choice that day, to choose God, to choose their birthright - the water and the love of God.

We had gone from despair to joy in a matter of minutes. Baptism no longer some ritual of antiquity, but a real live blessing in the moment - a transformation through the water and the Spirit of God. In an instant the room was filled with tears of joy, real joy not only for that mother and child but a joy that grows from accepting the unconditional love of God, deeply, personally.

Ours is an invitation from Jesus to embrace our true identity where we are not bound by the mistakes of our past, but liberated as we are forgiven and blessed to live out our potential in the present and the future. We are loved not only for who we are, but for who we are becoming. Our identity is not isolated in being a daughter or son, a father or mother, a sister or brother. We are not fully defined by our work or our accomplishments or lack thereof. We are not completely shaped by our disappointments, rejections, or our mistakes. Who we become need not be left in the hands of those who would be happy to fashion our image. Our identity grows from the love of God for us, for each one of us is watermarked and spirit filled.

We begin Lent on Wednesday of this week. We have a six week journey where each one of us could become more intentional about living in the light. A journey of releasing bitterness and self judgment so that we might embrace compassion and a strong sense of self worth. And in the process, we will find that we grow ever stronger in our relationship with God and with one another.

This is a perfect day to symbolically wade in the waters of grace, to step off the banks of the Jordan and experience with Jesus the power of God's words for us. For in the words of Howard Thurman "Anyone who is as sure of God as was Jesus can hear for himself, 'Thou are ... my beloved....'"

Hear those words coming across the ages toward you this day and take them to heart. "Thou art my beloved with whom I am well pleased." You are watermarked and spirit filled. Your true identity - child of God.

For additional copies of this sermon or of others please visit our website at [www.msumc.org](http://www.msumc.org) and click on 'sermons'