

Spankings, Elevators, Mirrors, and Baptism

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I wonder if it would make more of an impact on people if we spanked them when they became part of the body of Christ, rather than simply baptizing them with water. After all, one of the meanings of baptism is the washing away of sins, and a good spanking at baptism may help people straighten out and be good afterwards.

But then again, Jesus was baptized and didn't need to be straightened out, so maybe water alone is sufficient.

In our Presbyterian tradition, we see baptism as our entrance into Christ's family. We become brothers and sisters in Christ and become heirs to God's Kingdom through baptism.

In our text this morning, Luke says that Jesus heard God speak to him after he was baptized. Paraphrasing, God said, "I'm proud of you, son." Luke doesn't tell us whether others heard God's voice that day or not, but I imagine it was a beautiful scene. Jesus baptized, and God tells him he's proud of who he's become.

God was giving His blessing to Christ's mission in the world. But here's what I find most heartening: God was also giving His blessing to all who would be baptized in the years to come.

In I John 3 you'll find these words, *"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."*

Baptism tells us who we are: children of God. At our baptism there was an unheard voice from heaven saying, "This is my son, this is my daughter, whom I love."

Henri Nouwen writes, "'You are my beloved and on you my favor rests' is what God says to each human being. We have an identity and a birthright given to us by the one who created and loves us. This blessing and essential birthright is hard to hear above all the other voices of our lives, the voices that shout, 'You are no good, you are worthless, you are ugly, nobody cares about you.'"

But somebody does care about us, and that somebody is God. With our baptism, we are brought into the family of God as a child of God. A brother or sister of Christ set apart, commissioned for service, loved eternally.

Secondly, **baptism offers us the opportunity for a new life**, which is why the water of baptism is important. Sure, it's a symbol of being washed clean, but it's also a symbol of a new birth. And with that new birth comes an opportunity for a new life.

Next Monday, a week from tomorrow, our nation celebrates Martin Luther King, Jr. day. King often stood at the front of civil rights demonstrations as firefighters and police turned on him and fellow demonstrators with high-pressure water hoses. It had to sting badly.

King once remarked that he and the other demonstrators had a common strength in baptism: "There was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out . . . We had known

water. If we were Baptists or some other denomination, we had been immersed. If we were Methodists, and some others, we had been sprinkled, but we knew water.”¹

The water of our baptism is a powerful force in our lives. When the water was applied to us in baptism the very power of God was released on our soul. The Holy Spirit took up residence in our lives. We became, at that moment, part of God’s kingdom on earth.

As such, we became God’s agents in our family and in our community. Hearing that should cause us to wonder if we’re being all that God has created us to be? I know I’m blessed by God, but every now and again I pause to reflect on whether I’m living a life of significance, making a positive difference in the world.

Have you ever noticed mirrors on elevator doors, and wondered what the point of them are? Apparently, some years ago, there were a lot of complaints about the time people spent waiting for elevators. And the higher the buildings grew, the more people complained about the time they spent in the elevators.

Engineers gathered to try to speed up the elevators or see if new elevators could be added in the shafts that they had, but there seemed to be absolutely no solution to this problem. They spent a lot of money on consulting fees, until someone spoke up and said, “Let’s fix this with mirrors.”

“What do you mean, fix it with mirrors?” Well, the person suggested, the problem really wasn’t the speed of the elevators or the number of elevators in the building, but the real problem was in the minds of the people who were waiting for the elevators.

So he said, “Let’s give them something to do. What do people like to do most? They like to look at themselves in the mirror! Put mirrors all the way around, and the time will just fly by.” And sure enough, they did it. And the time flies by.²

So let me ask you this: how much time do you spend looking in mirrors at yourself, and how much time do you spend looking out windows at the needs of others? That’s another way to consider if we’re living a self-centered or a sacrificial life.

And one last thing about baptism. **Baptism reminds us that God will always be there for us, and won’t let us go.**

Reverend Eugene Nelson tells about a young man in his church who returned home from his first year at college. He appeared at Nelson’s office to tell him that he would not be at church while he was home over the summer.

When Nelson asked why, the young man said, “Well, you see, I have been doing a lot of thinking about religion while I was at college, and I have come to the conclusion that there is not much to this religion thing. I found out I don’t need the church to get by.”

Nelson responded by saying that he found all this very interesting. “Aren’t you worried?” the young man asked. “I thought you would go through the roof when I told you that!”

Nelson had known this boy for about five years, had baptized him a couple of years ago, and watched him grow during his high school years. He came from a difficult family

¹ Cited by David Reynolds, <http://www.gb-gm-umc.org/elktonvaumc/sermons/2006%20Sermons/jan0806.pdf>.

² Cited by David A. Renwick, <http://www.2preslex.org/S020217.HTM>.

situation. The church had been very interested in him and had a hand in helping him to go to college.

“No,” Nelson responded. “I am interested in what you said, but not overly concerned. I’ll be watching to see if you can pull it off.” “What do you mean, ‘pull it off?’” the young man huffed. “I’m nineteen, I can decide to do anything I want to do!”

“Yes, I thought the same thing when I was nineteen,” replied Nelson. “What I’m saying is, I’m not so sure you will be able to get away with this.” “Why not?” the young man asked. “Well, for one thing,” said Nelson, “you are baptized.” “So, what’s that got to do with anything?”

“It means that there are people here who care about you. They made promises to God when you were baptized. You try not showing up around here this summer, and they will be nosing around: asking you what you are doing with your life; what kind of grades you made last semester; what you’re doing with yourself.

And then, there’s God. No telling what God might try to do with you. From what I’ve seen of God, once He has claimed you, you don’t get off the hook so easily. God is relentless in claiming what is God’s. And, in baptism, God says you belong to Him.”

Nelson ends his story this way: “The boy shook his head in wonder at this strange unreasonable brand of reasoning and more or less stumbled out the door of my study. In a week or so, he was back at his usual place in the second pew. The baptized had done their work.”

“A voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’” That was the voice of God at Jesus’ baptism. But it could have been your baptism.

We are part of God’s family. We part of God’s kingdom. We are part of God’s plan to redeem the world. Wherever we go, whatever we do, God is there with us.

I don’t think there’s a no more important statement about our lives than this: We’ve been baptized.