

Matthew 3: 15-18

<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,<sup>[a]</sup> with whom I am well pleased.”

### Trinity Presbyterian Church

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#### “Navigating the Waters of Discipleship: Baptism”

What does it mean to be a Christian? Maybe we answer to follow Jesus or share God’s love with the world. Perhaps we name some social action: like feeding the poor or working toward reconciliation. Maybe we blush because the term “Christian” these days comes with a lot of baggage. But break down the word and see, “Christ” means “anointed one” and “ian” means “of”—as in a North Carolinian claiming to be “of North Carolina.” Now add it all together. To be Christian means to be “of the anointed one.” In all four gospels Jesus’ first adult action is to be anointed for ministry by being baptized in the Jordan River. So we Christians who are “of the anointed one” are baptized for ministry as well. Our baptism is where it all begins.

At the outset, we need to confess: we forget the foundation of our faith resides in baptismal waters. Who we are. What we are about. How we are formed as people of the anointed one. All of it begins with being baptized into the Christian life. Maybe we were marked as infants. Maybe we were dipped as adults. Either way, God’s mark of love on our lives has formed us whether we realize it or not. I remember during our time in Seattle. I was telling my parents about how I felt called to work with the LGBTQ community. After listening my parents told me that when I was baptized—at three years old—it was done by a Catholic priest who was gay. Now maybe one has nothing to do with the other or it’s just a coincidence? Or maybe it was the mark of God’s love ever since my baptism continuing to form and call on me? We all have stories. So maybe it is why we get so teary eyed when witnessing a baptism. Because there is nothing more beautiful than someone being marked by God’s love. And there is nothing more honoring than being the community of people who are entrusted with raising them in the faith. Who we are—our identity. What our lives are about—our ministry—begins in baptismal waters and forms us throughout our entire lives. Our baptism is the foundation of our faith.

Of course in the water we realize there is a cost: Our life is no longer ours. Sure we still get to live it; we have the power to make choices. But something within us must die. St. Paul tells us we die with Christ in the waters so we can be raised with Christ to new life. His point is we can’t rise to new life unless the old way-of-life dies. The language might turn us off, but if we think about it perhaps it’s true: the oppressive voices in our lives, which have bound us up in shame—“You’re not enough: skinny enough, smart

enough, successful enough, worthy enough” and so on—maybe it is those voices which need to be washed away. Or perhaps in the water we bump up against a suppressed memory. Painful. So painful it has led us down an unhealthy road. It has to be faced if it is ever going to get rinsed away. Or maybe it is under the water, in the moment where it feels like we are drowning, gasping for breath, that we finally realize that we are not our own savior. We can’t save ourselves or anyone else no matter how hard we try. The old self with all its attachments to control, expectations, wounds, selfishness has to wash away. While in the waters we discover the cost. Our life is no longer our own. Something inside us has to die.

Except, good news! Good news! We know how the baptism story ends. We emerge out of baptism with Jesus as gospel people. Drenched in love. Soaked in forgiveness. Dripping in freedom! The air tastes sweet. We see clearly with fresh eyes. Our ears are open to hearing, “You are my beloved child with whom I am well pleased.” Most of us spend our entire lives trying to earn the words from parents or friends. But the words come to us from God before we ever do a thing! Have a friend who said that whenever she gave birth to each of her children the first thing she did was to whisper in their ear, “You are my beloved child with whom I am well pleased.” They are the first words God wants all of us to hear. And somehow it frees us. Frees us from the delusion that we can make ourselves into more holy people. Frees us to follow Jesus not because we expect to succeed, but because we aren’t afraid to fail. Frees us to serve justice, like the great saints who held empires of oppression accountable to God. Empires who tried to silence their voices but could not; because they could not control or manipulate those who have already died with Christ in the water. It is how the baptism story ends. We emerge with Jesus as gospel people. Drenched in love. Soaked in forgiveness. Dripping in freedom.

Our Christian life—our life “of the anointed one”—begins with our anointing in baptism. So remember. Remember the waters which set you free. Remember God’s voice who claims you as God’s own: “You are my beloved child.” Now be free to allow the rest to wash away.