

God's Mona Lisa Smile: Eight Truths to Remember About Our Baptism

Matthew 3: 13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 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. 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. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Every year, on the first Sunday after Epiphany, we take one Sunday to remember our baptism vicariously through remembering Jesus's. So I thought this year it might be fun to offer the eight most beautiful and challenging truths I can think of for us as a baptized community.

Number one: You are loved. Period. End of sermon. Ironically, love isn't as interested with changing us as much as it is with simply being with us. Nothing tickles me more than how Calvin and Jackson insist on wearing their "Loved." t-shirts whenever they come to church. It is like these shirts are our church uniforms. And in this instance, they become our teachers and a reflection of baptism's truest sermon. The ultimate reality about each of us is that we are loved. Right here. Right now. Period. End of sermon.

Number two: You belong to God. God *does not* belong to us. You see, when we believe God belongs to us, we always end up making God too small. *If* you need a good parable about this watch any of the *Toy Story* movies and make sure you have some Kleenex nearby. They are always looking at the bottom of their shoes where their owner, Andy's, name is written on them. For us, our life belongs to God. If you still have questions you can always go back to number one or if you forget just look at the bottom of your shoe.

Where things get a bit more complicated is that we all belong to each another as well. *Number three:* We are created for community and community life is irritating and sometimes impossible. I once saw a bumper sticker that read, "The more I deal with people the more I prefer my dog." And who wouldn't prefer being greeted with a happy-to-see-you wagging tail, than with another critique about something we forgot to do or did wrong. Baptism says we all belong, with all our quirks and needs and family histories. But our belonging is never on my terms. It's on God's terms. So if I belong with all my baggage, then you belong with all your baggage too. Although I don't think it's an ideal situation, it often makes things richer and far more expansive than we could've ever imagined. If we truly grasped this concept, there would be no need for walls or segregated neighborhoods. Congress would get things done. Baptism says you belong to me and I belong to you. And the categories of "us" and "them" are the stuff of make believe. There is only us. Take it or leave it.

Well if we take it, then it leads to *number four*: we show up. As someone once said, “The most holy discipline there is, is showing up.” I don’t think it is a coincidence that Jesus’ first action, before he heals the sick or raises the dead, is to show up. This doesn’t always mean showing up prepared. It means we do it anyways. Even if we don’t know what we are doing or feel like we don’t have anything to put in the offering plate. It means your presence *is* doing something despite of what it feels like. God wastes nothing, *especially* when we show up for what matters.

Number five is the hardest: at some point our baptism asks us to surrender. When Jesus is baptized, there is a line in our bible that says, “Jesus consented.” Literally, he surrenders. Nobody knows this better than our friends in A.A. who must accept the reality that they aren’t in control and must surrender to a higher power. As they say, “If you want to live, something has to give.” Some of us work tirelessly at controlling our outcomes. Others keep searching for the missing puzzle pieces that will fill the swiss cheesy holes in our soul. But nothing outside of ourselves is going to fix us. And more, what then would be the purpose of grace? We are all profoundly and inexplicably human. We fall. We bruise. Our synopsizes misfire. We get tired. We grow old. Anne Lamott talks about this when she describes typing with her iPad on her lap. Suddenly she sees a bunch of random letters appearing as she writes. She looks down and realizes that the top roll of her tummy is creeping over the screen and has started typing gibberish on its own. She says, “In the old days...I would have [freaked out or] decided to start a new diet...Now I think, ‘Who knows? Maybe it’s got something interesting to add.’” The acceptance of our humanity is perhaps the most beautiful gift God offers us. It is what Jesus steps into when he surrenders to having John baptize him.

Once our guard comes down, a tiny miracle takes place. *Number five*: we are now open to receive. As Christians we are taught that our calling is one of service and giving, and it is. But we can’t overlook the beautiful vulnerability of receiving someone else’s gratitude or taking in their care. How in the world can Jesus, or anyone else, share God’s love if we aren’t able to drink deeply of it ourselves? If you have any problems receiving, then you can practice what Julian of Norwich used to do. She would open her hands, bring them into to her heart, and then release it up to God. If you need to start simpler than that, you can always default to receiving the basic truth of number one; or give someone a hug and really feel what it is like to have them hug you back.

Number six: God is far more content with us than we realize. Regardless of what fire and brimstone preachers have jackhammered into our heads, when God says, “I’m well pleased with you,” God means it. In the Greek, the language is not that God is ecstatic or beaming, even when it comes to Jesus. God is simply content. God’s smile is less like a televangelist’s and more like Mona Lisa’s. Jesus doesn’t have to earn God’s approval and neither do we. God is content with who we are, so perhaps we can relax and learn to be, too.

Then there is *number seven*: you are significant. When we offer our energy to providing for families at the Bolton Food Pantry, when we gather together to make soup for a person in need, when we stand with arms linked against injustice, we are not only God’s child, we are also God’s partner. God’s vision for the world pumps through *our* veins. God’s healing pulses through our hands. This church does a lot of small things with great love. So I hope you know the truth of how significant you are, both inside and outside of the church’s walls.

Which brings us to the end. *Number eight*. Death. Oh how it guts us to lose the people we are closest too. Their absence makes us homesick. Despite what society says, we never truly get over these loses and I am convinced we aren't meant to. There is a reason baptism is called a death and a rebirth. Because in our dying and being born we come to learn that both of these events are sacred. And when that time comes for us to dance on the edge of this mystery, be assured: you will have the loveliest people surrounding you, praying for you, squeezing you as tightly as a child does her favorite toy. Baptism says, we are on this wild ride together, and we help each other when it comes time to cross over to the other side. As Ram Dass once said, "When all is said and done, we're really just all walking each other home."

In a moment we get the privilege of welcoming new members to our holy and quirky group. They belong to us and we belong to them. All because God is still looking upon us with a content Mona Lisa smile.

Well that's it for now. If I can think of anything else, I'll be sure to add it to next year's sermon. And if you happen to forget, just look at Calvin and Jackson's t-shirts and be reminded that we are loved. Period. Which is always number one. Amen.