

The First Sunday after the Epiphany:

The Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ: Matthew 3:13-17

Preached Sunday, January 9, 2011

**In St. Luke's Church, East Greenwich, RI
By**

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In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Recently, I was rummaging through a box of old photographs, and I discovered a picture of my Baptism. It was an old black and white photograph dated, June 1954. My Uncle John, a Redemptorist priest after whom I am named, was pouring water over my head. I don't remember too much about Uncle John, except that he used to take me out on long walks when he would come home to Rhode Island to visit my mother and father. My father and Fr. John had a very close relationship growing up. He went to his eternal home many years ago. As many of you know, I was ordained yesterday in the Cathedral of St. John by Bishop Wolf. As I look forward to my work as a Deacon and my subsequent ordination as a priest here in St. Luke's Church; I think of him and I feel his presence, especially as I sit in the sanctuary or when I climb into the pulpit to preach.

I can't begin to tell you how much I am looking forward to the joy of baptizing children and adults as a priest. I look at baptism with a special joy in my heart because Baptism has given you and me our identity. By our Baptisms we know who we are, what we are and to whom we belong. Baptism gives us our identity and Baptism is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian.

We are in the season of Epiphany. Last Thursday, the church celebrated the visit of the Magi and the first manifestation of Jesus the Christ to the Gentiles. Today, we celebrate another one of those epiphanies with Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. In Matthew' Gospel, we heard that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form as a dove, and a voice came from Heaven, "This is my Son, the beloved; with whom I am well pleased."

All four Gospels portray this scene. In each version, the Holy Spirit descends "like a dove." The Holy Spirit is not a bird. Matthew and the other evangelists use the dove as a symbol for the Spirit's coming into our lives. It is a beautiful symbol. If you have ever seen a dove descend and land, it is very graceful, gentle and quiet. That is the point being made. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are telling us the way the Holy Spirit will enter our lives. The Holy Spirit came to Jesus gracefully,

gently and quietly. The same is true for us. We need to give God space, time, and quiet in our lives so we too can make that necessary room for God's Holy Spirit to speak to us. If our hearts and minds and souls are filled to the brim with the cacophony of life, then it will be difficult to hear and see and feel what God has to say to us. God needs just a bit of space to land in our lives.

Matthew is writing his Gospel for a Christian community. This is a Christian community that baptizes and celebrates the Lord's Supper, just like you and me. Matthew is telling them, your baptism means the same as Jesus' Baptism. You are God's daughter. You are God's son; with you God is well pleased. In your baptism your relationship to God was affirmed and then sealed. You are a child of God.

This is one of the most radical parts of Jesus' preaching. Jesus taught us that you and I can have the same personal and intimate relationship with God that he had as the Son of God. Jesus shocked his society by making statements like that because it was unthinkable that ordinary folks like you and me could have that kind of relationship with God. That was reserved only for the messiah; anointed kings and prophets. The exclusivity that characterized all religions up to that point was shattered. Jesus teaches us that God is calling us to a deeper intimacy

with himself. So Jesus commands us, when you pray say, “Our Father, say “Abba.” When we approach God, we must have a child like trust, which means we must have a complete trust, confident of the tenderness of our Father’s love for us. We put our hands into God’s hands and say “Abba, Daddy.”

As a parent, is there truly anything more wonderful as when a child looks into your eyes and says Mommy or Daddy? My daughter Amy will be 21 next month, and my heart still melts when she calls me Daddy. It is the most personal address. God wants this kind of a relationship with every one of us.

There are few commands that Jesus gave the disciples. One was, when you pray, say, “Our Father” “Abba” “Daddy.” The other command was, “Go into the world baptizing everybody in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; which is to say, go baptize the people of the world so they may have the experience that you do knowing that you are a child of God. Then teach them how to pray, “Our Father.”

The exclusivity that characterized all religions up to that point was shattered, simply demolished by Jesus’ preaching. The hierarchy of class was demolished by that preaching. Segregation by race was demolished by that preaching. Divisions between women and men were

demolished by that preaching. Separation caused by poverty and wealth was demolished by that preaching. Everything that human beings construct to separate us from one another and our God was shattered to pieces with Jesus' commands. We are all God's children. We all have the same parent. We are all sisters and brothers of the same parent, the same God. We all pray the same prayer, intimately, personally, to the same God. Although we approach God with a child like trust our relationship with God is similar to that of a parent to an adult child, not intervening, but loving and supporting, being there for that child in good times and bad. God's love for us is not a love that protects so much as it is a love that empowers.

One of the greatest gifts God has blessed me with is the gifts of my wife and my parents. Everyday, I thank God for blessing my life for their presence in my life. Their love and support for me on this lifelong journey to priesthood has empowered me in ways I never thought possible. In fact, without the love and support of my beloved wife Linda and my parents, Dot and Bob Higginbotham, it would have been impossible for me to overcome the many obstacles that come up along the way to ordination. They taught me two very important theological lessons. My parents taught me that it does not matter how or in what

church you bring people to God, just as long as you do. My wife taught me that nothing is impossible with God. I am so happy and proud to have my wife and parents here at St. Luke's with me today.

I want to leave you with a story. In preparation for this sermon I was reminded of an autobiography I was required to read in high school on the great black scientist and researcher, George Washington Carver. As you may recall, he took the simple peanut and made it into a great industry through his medical and commercial research.

Back in the 1920s, when prejudice was even more rampant, and much more open, than it is today, George Washington Carver would tell the black community not to let themselves be defined by those who are prejudiced against them. Do not let the culture label you. He was a religious man and he believed strongly in his baptism which defined him as a child of God.

In January 1921, Carver was summoned to Washington D.C. by the powerful Senate Ways and Means Committee to explain his work on the peanut. He expected such a high level committee to handle their business with dignity and decorum. He was shocked when speaker after speaker got up ahead of him to make their presentation before the committee. This lasted for three days. For three days he endured racial

slurs and expletives. As the only African American Man in the room he was the very last to speak. Begrudgingly, the committee calls him forward. As he walks down the aisle, he is verbally assaulted with all kinds of crude and hurtful racial remarks. One committee member shouts out, “I suppose you have plenty of peanuts and watermelon to keep you happy.” Another committee member leans back in his chair places his feet up on the table and puts his hat over his face as if to go to sleep. When the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee instructs the member to take off his hat, he responds with a loud and ugly racial slur. Keep in mind these are United States Senators in formal committee hearings.

At this point George Washington Carver is ready to turn around and go home. He is the only black man in a room full of infuriated openly racist and powerful white men. However, he did not walk out of that room. He stayed the course because he was reminded of his baptism. He knew who he was. He knew what he was. He knew to whom he belonged. In his autobiography Carver wrote, “Whatever they said of me, I knew that I was a child of God and so I said to myself inwardly, ‘Almighty God, let me carry out your will. Whatever they say of me, I know who I am: I am a child of God. I am your son.’”

By his baptism, in the face of great adversity, George Washington Carver was given courage because of his identity. He was courageous. He was empowered. He was fearless.

When he gets to the podium, he was told he had 20 minutes to speak. He opens his display case and begins to talk. His presentation is so engaging and so compelling; the committee chair rises and asks for an extension so Carver can continue his presentation. No one opposes the request. Four extensions and two hours later, every member of that Senate Ways and Means Committee is on his feet applauding this scientist and former black slave.

What gave George Washington Carver the courage to stand there in the midst of all that racial bigotry? It was the knowledge that he had been baptized. By our baptism we know who we are. We know what we are. We know to whom we belong. Baptism is so much more than a cleansing from sin. Baptism represents our identification with Jesus Christ. Baptism is our initiation into the Body of Christ, the church. So as you go forth from your church today, please remember that you have been baptized. You are not your own. Live your life fearlessly and courageously knowing you are never alone, and that you are not your own. You belong to Almighty God. You are God's child. You are God's

daughter. You are God's son. With you God is well pleased. AMEN.

May God bless you all!