

“STANDING IN THE PLACE OF SINNERS”

Matthew 3:13-17

The Baptism of Our Lord/First Sunday after Epiphany (Series A)

January 8, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the First Sunday after Epiphany comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 3, verses 13 through 17. It is on page 682 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus does something that only sinners are supposed to do. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Matthew 3, we begin reading at verse 13.

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “**Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.**” Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Sinners—that’s what they were. Repentance—that’s what was going on. Confessing their sins—that’s what the people were doing. Baptizing—that’s what John was doing.

Men and women, rich and poor, people from the city and people from the country—they were all coming to John to be baptized in the Jordan River. They were various people from different places and different walks of life. But they all had one thing in common. They were sinners, and they knew it. That’s why they were here. They came to be baptized by John precisely because they were sinners. Both Mark and Luke, in their gospels, call John’s baptism “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). They came because they were sinners. They confessed their sins. John baptized them. And God forgave their sins. That’s what was going on. That’s why all these people were out in the wilderness. They came because they were sinners, and something needed to be done about it. They came to be baptized, because baptism is for sinners.

But then the most unexpected thing happens. Jesus comes. And he comes to be baptized. Imagine this. All these sinners, coming to be baptized. Everyone there was a sinner, and it wasn’t just a coincidence. They were there precisely because they were sinners. We could call it “The Filthy Sinners Baptism Club.” *No perfect people allowed!*

And then Jesus, of all people, comes to be baptized.

One of these things is not like the others.

One of these things just doesn’t belong ...

So you can imagine John’s hesitation when Jesus comes to be baptized. John tries to prevent him. He says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (3:14)

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John knew who Jesus was. That was the whole point of John’s ministry. He was the messenger. He was

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight’ ” (3:3; Is.40:3).

John’s entire ministry was a preparation for Jesus to be revealed. And he prepared the way by calling people to repent. He preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (3:2). Then he baptized them with “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). This is what John did to prepare sinners for the coming of the Lord. And then the Lord comes to be baptized. Imagine the shock.

Does Jesus need repentance? Does he have sins that need to be forgiven? John’s entire ministry is based on the idea that Jesus is “The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of world” (John 1:29). This can’t be true if Jesus has his own sins that need to be forgiven.

So John’s entire theological system is thrown upside down. Up is down. Down is up. The Righteous One is acting like a sinner. What is happening? Doesn’t Jesus know what baptism is? Doesn’t he know who it’s for? Out here in the wilderness, these muddy waters of the Jordan are a place for sinners. Baptism is a place for sinners. So what is Jesus doing here?

Jesus goes to the muddy waters of the Jordan River precisely because it is a place for sinners. Jesus stood in that river because he came to stand in the place of sinners.

Here’s the thing: Jesus did not need to be baptized. *We* needed Jesus to be baptized. When John the Baptist tried to prevent it, Jesus said, “**Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness**” (3:15).

Now, whose righteousness needed to be fulfilled? Was Jesus lacking some good work that had to be accomplished in order for him to become righteous? No. Jesus is perfectly righteous. He always has been. That’s why John is so confused. Jesus insisted on baptism in order to fulfill all righteousness *for us*.

Baptism is a place for sinners, and the place of sinners is where the Savior must stand. Jesus does not hold himself aloof from sinners. He identifies with us. He joins himself to us. He takes our sin upon himself. That is what he was born to do. He didn’t come simply prove to us how much better he is than us. And he didn’t come simply to be a teacher. God could have sent another prophet to do that. God took on human flesh in order to join himself to sinners and save them from their sins. Baptism is a place for sinners, and the place of sinners is where the Savior must stand.

Luther put it this way. He said,

“[Christ] accepted [baptism] from John for the reason that he was entering into our stead, indeed, our person, that is, becoming a sinner for us, taking upon himself the sins which he had not committed, and wiping them out and drowning them in his holy baptism. And that he did this in accord with the will of God, the heavenly Father, who cast all our sins upon him that he might bear them and not only cleanse us from them through his baptism and make satisfaction for them on the cross, but also clothe us in his holiness and adorn us with his innocence.” (LW 51:319)

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Luther is right, so long as we don't separate Jesus' baptism from his death. We ought to see Jesus' baptism as a foreshadowing of the cross. Jesus' identification with sinners will become even more extreme than what we see at the Jordan River. If we struggle to understand Jesus identifying himself with common sinners at his baptism, we will have an even harder time when Jesus identifies himself with condemned criminals in his death.

Here's the whole point: Jesus identified himself with sinners in order to save sinners. We can even go so far as to say that Jesus became a sinner for us. Scripture requires us to go that far. Peter wrote, "He himself bore our sins in his body" (1 Peter 2:24). And Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians, "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus actually became your sin. And, remarkably, that is how you are saved.

This can be a difficult truth to comprehend. John had a hard time understanding what Jesus was doing, and we can struggle with it too. And I think our hesitation is this: we want a god who is pure, clean, and better than us. And, indeed, all those things are true about God. But in order to save us, he has to become the exact opposite.

We would like to think of God as pure and clean, and we would also like to hide our sins from him. But God will have none of it. Not only does he not allow us to hide our sins from him, he breaks in and steals them away from us. So God comes down and gets himself dirty—even filthy—with the sins of the world. He has to become a sinner—not with his own sins, but with ours, taken upon himself as his own.

The one who is up has to come down, so that those who are down can go up. The one who is righteous has to become a sinner, so that sinners can become righteous.

And this is what Jesus demonstrates in his baptism. He identifies himself with sinners. He teaches us that he has come to stand in our place.

And of all the things that bring glory to God, Jesus' baptism is near the top of the list. After Jesus came up out of the river, the heavens opened up, the Spirit of God descended like a dove, and God the Father spoke audibly, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17). And what was the Father pleased with? He was well pleased that his perfect, holy, and righteous Son was identifying with sinners. Remarkable. The Father was well pleased that his Son was getting dirty with our sin.

That's what Jesus' baptism was all about. Jesus was baptized precisely because baptism is intended for sinners.

But that was not the only thing Jesus did that is intended for sinners. After all, Jesus went to the cross—a place intended for the worst of all sinners. The cross is where all of this is going.

As Christians we put crosses on just about everything. And we usually try to make them aesthetically pleasing. Gold jewelry with diamonds. Woodworking projects with carefully applied varnish. But how often do we think about the real cross—you know—the thing our symbols represent. There was nothing pleasant about a real cross. It was designed to be a brutal and publicly humiliating instrument of execution. Criminals were stripped naked, and strung up on this pole. They were put there so that everyone could watch them die a slow and painful death. Rome did this for purpose of torturing them, humiliating them, and letting them be a sign to the general public that says, "This is what we do to really bad people. So if you don't want this to happen to you, be good." The cross was a place for the worst of the worst.

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And that’s where we find Jesus—hanging in the place of sinners. On his left and on his right were criminals. And the cross in the middle—that’s the one for us. That’s the cross on which the sins of the world were hung. Because that’s where Jesus goes. He goes to the cross—a place for sinners—in our place.

And then he goes to the grave. Death is a place for sinners. Every sinner has this in common: we all die. And it’s no coincidence. We die precisely because we are sinners. Scripture is very clear on this: “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

When God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden, he intended them to live there forever. And if they had not rebelled against God’s commandment, they would have. And all of their offspring would have lived forever. But they sinned. They disobeyed God, and death came into the world. Both their bodies and their souls were corrupted. And this corruption was passed on to every child born of man and woman. So we are by nature sinful and unclean, and our bodies are doomed to decay. We die because of sin. The grave is a place for sinners. So Jesus went there too. He went to the grave in our place.

All the places that are appointed for sinners—Jesus went to those places. He joined himself to our humanity, and he went to all the places appointed for sinners so that he could also take us to all the places appointed for the righteous. He takes us to all the places appointed for the sinless Son of God.

When he was baptized, he stood there in our place. When he was crucified, he hung there in our place. When he was laid in a tomb, he was laid there in our place. He did all this so that on the third day, he could make the resurrection our place too. And he gives this gift to you through the Sacrament of Baptism.

In your baptism you were joined to Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. This is what we learned in the epistle lesson from Romans 6. Hear this again. This is marvelous:

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Rom. 6:3-5)

In his incarnation at Christmas he joined himself to our flesh. In his baptism he identified himself with sinners. On the cross he bore our sins in his body. He joined himself to humanity and did all these things for us. And in your baptism, he joins you to himself so that all the things he did become yours. His life is your life. His righteousness is your righteousness. His death is your death. His resurrection is your resurrection. And his eternal inheritance is also your eternal inheritance.

In Matthew 3, as Jesus stood in the muddy waters of the Jordan River, he stood in a place for sinners. This should not really surprise us, because this is what Jesus was born to do—to go to all the places appointed for sinners. He identified himself with us, and he went to all these places in our place. He went to the cross—the place for the most abhorrent sinners. And he

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went there in our place. He even went to the grave—the place where all sinners eventually end up. And he went there in our place. He went to all the places appointed for sinners, so that he could bring sinners to all the places appointed for him—the sinless Son of God. He makes the resurrection our place. He even makes his eternal kingdom our place. “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:5). Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.