

Sermon Baptism of Our Lord
January 10, 2015
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Matthew 3:13-17
Jesus Joins Himself With Sinners

This past September, Pope Francis spoke to a joint meeting of Congress in Washington D. C. After he left his podium, Rep. Bob Brady of Philadelphia took the Roman pontiff's water glass back to his office and shared the glass with some staffers and his wife before saving the remaining water to bless his grandchildren. Brady, a Roman Catholic, believes that the water with the glass is *blessed*, because the Pope drank from it. Of course there is nothing special about that glass of water. It's ordinary water in an ordinary cup, which was drunk by an ordinary man. The pope cannot, by his mere presence, make anything holy or blessed. God *does* make people holy through his Word and Sacraments. But the idea that a mere man can make a cup of water holy is pure superstition.

Yet there is a smidgen of truth in the congressman's thought process. The holy God can certainly make what is common holy and what is ordinary extraordinary with *his* presence. Yet God does this intentionally with a promise you can hear.

Our Gospel lesson gives us an example of when God does make ordinary water extraordinary and holy with *his* presence. When Jesus was baptized he joined himself to the waters of baptism and made baptismal water holy. Jesus is God, the true Son of God. Unlike the pope, he is holy in and of himself and has power to change something ordinary into something holy. So when Jesus touched the waters of baptism, he made

baptism blessed. So we Christians should cherish baptism even more than Congressman Brady cherishes the pope's used water glass.

Jesus did not need to be baptized for his own sake. John baptized sinners with a water of repentance. Jesus had no need for repentance. He had nothing to repent of. Jesus is holy—without sin. John knew this. That is why he initially refused Jesus' request and said, "I need to be baptized by *you*, and do you come to me?" John meant, "I need to be washed clean by you! I need you, my dear Lord and Savior to cleanse me of my sins. I cannot cleanse you. You have no need of cleaning." But Jesus did not come to the Jordan to be cleansed, but to become dirty. By joining himself to Baptism, Jesus became a sinner in *your* place. Jesus is the cleaning agent in the water, the detergent, which scours sins. Without Jesus, the water is as ordinary as the water in the pope's glass. But with Jesus, this water is a baptism, a bath that washes away sins.

We learn a lot about our baptism when we look at Jesus' baptism. First, look who is present at his Baptism. We have Jesus: the true Son of God, begotten of the Father from eternity; true God and true man; our Savior. Then we hear the voice from heaven. God the Father himself speaks! And he declares that Jesus is his Son, his beloved, with whom he is well pleased. God the Father announces His Son Jesus' incredible worth and innocence. Finally we have the Holy Spirit descend as a gentle dove upon Christ, showing the Spirit of God rests quite literally upon him. At Jesus' baptism we have the Triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three distinct Persons from eternity, yet One eternal God.

And this same Holy Trinity is present in *your* Baptism. Jesus himself says in the last chapter of Matthew, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations *baptizing them*

in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Jesus is declaring to his disciples that the baptism by which they will baptize connects all the baptized to Jesus’ baptism, where the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit made themselves known. To be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is to be baptized into Jesus’ Baptism.

Not only are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit present in your baptism, but they are working in your baptism. Baptism is God’s work. Although the pastor is an ordinary person, who can’t make anything holy in and of himself; and although the water is ordinary water from the faucet; baptism is *not* ordinary. Because God has combined his Word and promise, even, Himself to Baptism. Although you just see a pastor speaking and pouring water, it is the Triune God who is working. Just as surely as the Holy Trinity was present at Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, so are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit present in every baptism that bears their name. God blesses every baptism with *his* blessing.

It is very important that we understand that baptism is *God’s* work and not ours. If Baptism is *our* work, than it really isn’t worth anything. Yet, most Protestants in America teach just that. They deny that Baptism is God’s work. The Baptists, Pentecostals, Mennonites, and many so-called non-denominational churches deny that Baptism saves. They claim that Baptism is our work that we do out of obedience to God. Baptism, they claim, is just a sign that *we* have accepted Jesus. Many of these groups then will *re-*baptize, if they think a person has fallen away since the first baptism or wasn’t really ready to make a proper baptism. It depends on the person. For the same reason, they deny baptism to babies, because babies aren’t able to make a confession and show the

obedience necessary to be baptized. By teaching such things they *rob* God of his glory. They claim *his* work for themselves. And they deny people of God's gift of Baptism.

Baptism is *grace*. It is God's gift to you. Baptism is *not* our work. If you need proof, just listen to how the Bible speaks of Baptism. St. Peter says, "Baptism ... now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21). If Baptism saves, it is not our work; it is God's. St. Paul says as much, "[God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior." (Titus 3:5-6) If baptism is our work, it does not save, but baptism is God's work, so it does save. The Bible says so.

Deniers of infant baptism often say that we are saved by *grace*, so we do not need baptism. But if Baptism is *God's* work, then Baptism *is* grace. We baptize babies, because babies are born sinners. "That which is born of flesh is flesh and that which is born of Spirit is spirit." (John 3:6) Everyone born of the flesh is a sinner, who needs salvation. God uses Baptism, through the power of his Word to save even babies. As Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me." (Mark. 10:13) And when they brought the children, Jesus blessed them. How can we deny children of Jesus' blessing? Jesus blesses children through baptism.

We shouldn't despise baptism. Baptism is not a side issue, that isn't really that important. Some will say that you don't need Baptism; you only need to believe. But believe in what? Jesus has joined himself to baptism! St. Paul writes, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ 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.” (Rom. 6:3-4). Because Jesus has joined himself to Baptism, in our Baptism God joins us to Jesus’ work of salvation. It is a false dichotomy to say that you do not need baptism you only need faith in Jesus. Baptism is Jesus. Jesus has connected himself to Baptism. To have faith in Jesus means to believe his words. That means you believe that Jesus saves you through baptism. St. Paul places faith and baptism together. He writes to the Galatians, “For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through *faith*. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (Gal. 3:26-27) Paul doesn’t separate faith and baptism, and neither should we. Jesus binds himself so closely to baptism that faith should not be separated from baptism.

Now, one might say, “But God does not need to use Baptism to save! Look at the people in the Old Testament who didn’t have baptism!” And that is true. God doesn’t *need* to use baptism to save. Yet, God still gives us Baptism. God chose to use baptism to forgive our sins, wash our souls of sin, give us new birth with a new spirit, and make us his children. And God doesn’t do this as a burden, but as a comfort. God is generous in his grace. He not only gives us the Gospel preached, he gives us the Gospel spoken in Baptism, and in the Lord’s Supper, and in Absolution. God gives his Church these multiple means of Grace because he loves you. They are not intended to be a burden, but a joy.

Now certainly God *can* save people outside of the Sacrament of Baptism. There’s no record of the thief on the cross being baptized. Adults going through instruction before Baptism can trust in the Gospel even before their Baptism. And parents and commend the

soul of their babies who die before or at birth before they could be baptized, to God. They can take comfort in the fact that they brought their unborn baby to church to hear God's Word, that God hears their prayers for their baby. Christian parents of miscarried and stillborn children can certainly take comfort in the Gospel. But we don't make rules from exceptions.

For the rest of you who have had the opportunity to be baptized, you should cherish this gift from God. Just as surely as God's Word was spoken and water was poured on your head, God himself joined you to Jesus! God joined you to Christ's death and resurrection. He forgave your sins. And the Holy Spirit dwells in your heart.

And just as at Jesus' baptism the heavens were opened and God the Father proclaimed from heaven, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well please." God makes such a pronouncement to you in your Baptism. Since in Baptism you have put on Christ, having been washed with a water Christ has joined himself to, you have received adoption as a Child of God as well. And this adoption comes in handy, when you need to fend off attacks from the devil. As a child of God through your baptism you can mock Satan and say,

Satan hear this proclamation: I am Baptized into Christ

Drop your ugly accusation. I am not so soon enticed.

Now that to the font I've traveled, All your might has come unraveled

And, against your tyranny, God, my Lord, unites with me!

Rejoice in your Baptism. The waters of your baptism are truly blessed by God himself. And the benefits of it remain long after the water has dried. Believe in your Baptism. Believe that you are God's own Child.

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