

Spring Lake Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 3:13-17

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Why Baptism?

Hannah was almost two before we finally felt comfortable asking our pastor to baptize her. Both Bill and I had been baptized in a tradition that practiced Believer's Baptism – baptism that is chosen by the individual after we chose Jesus. It took us awhile to understand why we would baptize a child who could not yet choose for herself. The pastor took time with us, telling us that infant baptism proclaims the grace of God in a different way. Infant or child baptism proclaims that God chose us long before we could decide to choose God for ourselves. Further, it proclaims the saving work that has already been done for us in Christ Jesus. God's salvation of us began long before we could even begin to understand it, long before we could ever claim it for our own. On the cross of Jesus Christ we were all forgiven, we were all saved from our sin. Baptism is the sign and seal of God's gift of salvation. Baptism is not salvation itself, but the sign of the grace that has been so lavishly poured out upon us. Baptism is an acknowledgment that God claimed us long before we could even begin to claim God. In baptism we acknowledge that we belong to God. And so we dressed Hannah up in a really pretty white dress and pulled her little golden locks of hair back away from her face with fancy clips. And then we brought her to the font where she calmly received her baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We acknowledged that Hannah Grace Treadway was a child of God and that Christ had already done the saving work that allowed Hannah to live life forgiven and free.

Following worship, Hannah, Bill and I stood at the back door with the pastor, shaking hands and giving thanks to God until Hannah determined that she had had enough. Much to our dismay, Hannah lay down on the ground in the narthex and began to scream at the top of her lungs. To which Bill replied, "I don't think the baptism took." We tried to be good humored about the experience that was probably pretty exhausting for an almost-2-year-old, suggesting that she could handle it OK until she realized that we had, on her behalf, resisted all evil that would come her way, in which case she felt she needed to give God a little extra work. But her experience, in another way, taught us a little deeper meaning of baptism. Baptism itself does not make us better people. It doesn't even change our actions. We will continue to rebel and to fight with the God who loves us. We will continue to ask questions that deny God's authority. We will continue to grow and to seek and even to throw temper tantrums, but before we can understand, God claims us. Isn't that alone a reason to give thanks?! As we grow older there comes a time when we can choose to respond to that claiming, but we can never erase the claim God has upon us. We can never do anything that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Isn't that good news?!

But if baptism is an acknowledgment of God's saving work that was completed long ago when God through the person of Jesus Christ forgave our sins, then why would Jesus be baptized? Even John the Baptizer seems to think there is something a little strange about the fact that Jesus would be baptized. "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" After all, the gospels recognize John's baptism for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Why would Jesus need this kind of baptism? Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

In the New Testament, righteousness is a relational concept. Righteousness presumes a covenant relationship that needs the active participation of both covenant partners. "Thus the one who upholds, and therefore participates in, this covenant relationship is designated 'righteous,' and, as in the Old Testament, those acts which preserve a covenant relationship, either between God and [hu]man or between [hu]man and [hu]man, are righteous, while those acts which break this relationship are unrighteous."

God is righteous because God is faithful to promises made to [God's] creation. God upholds the relationship. At the same time through sin, faithless/unrighteous humankind has broken its relationship with that faithful God. It is in Christ that God restores the relationship, and this restoration is God's promise of salvation to humankind.

Salvation depends solely on God's act. God's restoration of this covenant with humanity through Christ reveals righteousness. Jesus himself is called righteous, not because his acts conform to a moral norm – his opponents called him a glutton and a drunkard and a friend of immoral people (Luke 7:34) – but because by his obedient sacrificial death he brings humanity into a new relationship with God (Romans 3:21, 22a, Colossians 1:20).¹

Today we have the opportunity to remember our own baptisms as we celebrate the baptism of Nyla Wrightsman. We recognize that God has claimed Nyla long before her birth, that God has been acting on her behalf before she was able to see God at work. We believe that God is the one who has made a home for her here, in Spring Lake, with Suzanne. We believe that God is the one who has provided her a loving faith community for her here at Spring Lake Presbyterian Church. We believe that God called her by name, called her "Child of God" before she could even begin to understand the depths of what that could mean. And we believe that in her baptism, we acknowledge the covenant God has made on her behalf, forgiving her sins through the love of God through Christ Jesus on the cross before her sins were even committed. The salvation of God through Christ was complete 2000 years ago and there is nothing she can say or do to change the fact that God loves her and forgives her, to change the fact that God calls her by name and claims her. Just as there is nothing we can say or do to change the fact that God loves us and forgives us, to change the fact that God calls each one of us by name and claims us.

¹⁶*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.* ¹⁷*And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."* In the gospel of Matthew, the public heard the voice of God speaking, *claiming*, "This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased." It is the same voice who, knowing that the covenant between humans and God is whole, speaks to each of us: You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter. It is the claim on humanity, and it urges us to see those around us differently. As we walk down the street, we look into the eyes of others who are children of God. As we stand in line at the grocery store, we realize we are in the presence of other children of God. As we drive down the road, we honk our horns at others who are claimed by God. And as we watch the news and hear difficult stories on the news, we hear stories of others who are loved by God and claimed by God before they even understand that for themselves. We watch loved ones who seem to choose the difficult route through life, remembering that God's salvation was complete for each of us – for each of them – before we *or they* could understand the Holy One's claim on our lives. And we believe that we and they belong to God. In baptism, we see the heavens opening before us and believe that God claims this messed-up world and loves us and calls us God's beloved.

So when Hannah began her temper tantrum about 8 years ago, she reminded us that baptism was complete even when she was not perfect. And I take comfort in that knowledge, that God who began a good work in her and in you and me, will be faithful to complete it.

¹ <http://www.elca.org/questions/Results.asp?recid=20> by Paul Achtemeier, Righteousness in the New Testament, Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, vol. R-Z-, page 91

And so the story of baptism is both quite simple and quite complex. In its simplicity it simply calls us God's children before any of us are aware that we might even desire to be God's children. In its complexity, it begs us to see others as God's children before we deem they may be deserving of that name – while they are still screaming and kicking on the floor of the narthex or in the corridors of the police station or in the drug rehabilitation room or on death row, for God's grace is never earned or deserved, it is a gift for all. May the heavens be opened to us so that we may see the spirit of God who descends upon this world, urging us to respond to others as God's beloved children. Amen.