

A Field Manual for Befuddled Followers of Jesus:  
Jesus' Baptism and Ours  
Matthew 3:13-17

In the church's three-year lectionary this year Matthew's gospel is featured. I will be mining its treasures as we move through Epiphany and Lent.

A word about Matthew's gospel. Though not the earliest gospel it is placed first in the New Testament because it is preeminently the teaching gospel, emphasizing the teachings of Jesus. It was used in the early church as a training manual for new followers of Jesus.

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I call my series of sermons to begin the year, "A Field Manual for Befuddled Followers of Jesus" because it is an on the ground guide for how to live as his followers.

I call it a manual for "*befuddled* followers of Jesus" because Jesus is not as easy to follow as most assume, both in our understanding of his teachings and in the difficulty of pulling them off. When I was growing up all we had to do was to "accept Jesus into our hearts", but there was little guidance on what to do once we did.

Sometimes Jesus' teachings and actions are puzzling. Novelist Romulus Linney wrote a collection of new stories about Jesus called *Jesus Tales*. The first was called "How Saint Peter Got Bald." (For some reason he is always bald in paintings of him.) As Peter followed Jesus he watched how Jesus interacted with people. Some Jesus was hard on, others easy. His teaching was sometimes confusing. Peter couldn't figure it out. So every time Jesus did or said something that confounded him, he scratched his head. That's how Saint Peter got bald.

So these sermons are on the teachings of Jesus, some of which befuddle us. Some seem impossible to follow, others seem to contradict themselves. For example, early in the Sermon on the Mount he says, "Let your light so shine before others that they will see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Then later in the Sermon he says when you help people don't let anyone know what you're doing. Don't even let your left hand know what your right hand is doing! Which is it, Jesus?! Or, why the difference? Clarence Jordan says that the instruction when giving alms that your left hand should not know what your right hand is doing means that when asked for money, stick your right hand in your pocket and don't count out what you will give with your left hand.

Then he says, if someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to them your other cheek. And if someone drags you into court and sues you for your coat, go to your closet and let them have your cloak too! What? More than once Jesus disciples

said, “Lord, this is impossible!” As when he said, “It is easier for a camel to wiggle through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter into heaven!”

Jesus’ teaching go beyond the inscriptions on Hallmark greeting cards!

## II

So now we turn to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, at his baptism.

As John the Baptist baptized him in the Jordan river, the veil between heaven and earth was torn open, the Spirit of God descended as a dove and a voice from heaven said, “ my son, the Beloved” in whom I am well pleased.”

So let’s talk about Jesus’ belovedness and ours. We have been talking about in this in Sunday School as I teach my book on baptism. At the heart of Jesus’ life was what we could call his “Abba experience”, his experience as the beloved of God. He called God “Abba”, the child’s first babbling word for a parent. Poppa, Momma. It spoke of his relationship with God as one of intimacy and trust, confidence and loyalty.

And he said, *we* could have that kind of relationship too!

I like to translate the words from God at his baptism, “in whom I am well pleased” as “in whom I take delight”, because *delight* conveys God’s unconditional love and enjoyment of us. No strings attached. “In whom I am well pleased” might convey God is pleased with us because we’ve done something

particularly good. When following Jesus we will inevitably get it wrong. So it is good to start this journey knowing our sheer belovedness

Gordon Cosby once said that the chief responsibility of parents is to *enjoy* their children. There will be time to teach and guide, yes, but our enjoyment of our children conveys in ways deeper than words *grace*.

Do you think God *likes* you? Not just loves you as God is *supposed* to do! Likes you! I love the Mr. Rogers song:

It's you I like,

It's not the things you wear,

It's not the way you fix your hair—

But it's you I like,

The way you are right now,

The way down deep inside you—Not

The things that hide you....

But it's you I like

Every part of you....

It's you yourself.

It's you.

It's you I like.

In the Westminster Catechism, perhaps the most well-known question is: “What is the chief end of man?” And the answer: “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” The enjoyment goes both ways.

Part of what infuriated Jesus’ opponents about his frequent eating with tax-collectors, prostitutes and sinners was that he enjoyed them!

### III

And then there’s the part of *sonship, daughtership*. Sonship is about mission and calling. It’s the calling to love the world God made. Jesus boiled all of the 613 commandments down to two: to love God with all our heart and mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

That’s not as easy as it sounds. We *grow* in these two loves. And we can’t do it all alone. So to me the deepest purpose of the church is “the increase in the love of God and neighbor.” If we are doing this we are doing it right. To love one’s neighbor is not always easy. It requires a little humility. As the poet Auden wrote: “Love your crooked neighbor with your crooked little heart.”

As sons and daughters of God, we join the purposes of God in the world, and everyone has a key way of becoming partners with God. It all has to do with doing what you do with the quality of love.

As I baptize people I use the ancient practice of the laying on of hands at baptism as a sign that we are all called and ordained to be ministers of Christ. Baptism is the ordination of all believers. We pour out to others the grace we have received. As they come up out of the water, they wipe the water out of their eyes. Then I lay my hands on their head and say:

Go now as God's son, daughter,  
called to be a minister of the love of Christ.

And as you go,

May the Lord bless you and keep you;

May the Lord make his face to shine

upon you and be gracious to you;

May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you

and *through you*, give the world peace.

Amen