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Matthew 3:13-17

THE RIGHT ANSWER

Today the church focuses its attention on the baptism of Jesus. This event raises a lot of questions. Such as, if Jesus was supposedly sinless, and baptism symbolizes the washing away of sins, why did Jesus have to be baptized? The baptism of Jesus raises questions about baptism itself: why we do it, what it means, what it means if someone isn't baptized, and why Christians make such a big deal about an event that many of us can't even remember happening to us. So today, we are going to ponder baptism.

In order to be ordained into ministry, Presbyterian seminary students have to take a series of ordination exams on subjects like theology, and the Bible, and Presbyterian government. When I was in seminary preparing to take those ordination exams, students who had already taken their exams would warn the rest of us about really difficult questions that might come up on the exams. One such really difficult question we were warned about which had occasionally appeared on the exams over the years was referred to by seminary students as “the dead baby question.” The question went something like this: “An infant has died and the parents come to you wanting you to baptize their child. What do you do? Explain your answer.”

The thought of being asked this question struck fear in the hearts of us students because it raised a great dilemma about what the right answer was. The question was designed to test the students' understanding of reformed theology regarding baptism. In some Christian traditions, there is the belief that someone who is not baptized can't get into heaven. Maybe you grew up with that belief. This belief, the belief that you have to be baptized in order to get into heaven,

circulates among Christians even if we were never formally taught this in our churches. But that is not how Christians coming from the reformed tradition, including us Presbyterians, understand baptism. Presbyterians do not regard baptism as some kind of a magical moment that becomes your entry ticket into heaven. A person does not reside outside the circle of God's love before baptism, but then after baptism is suddenly included in the circle of acceptance. That's not how Presbyterians understand baptism.

Here's the important difference. Baptism does not bestow God's love on a person but rather, baptism *acknowledges* the love of God that is already present. Let me say that again because it is an important distinction. Baptism does not bestow God's love upon a person, rather, baptism acknowledges God's love that is already present.

When parents present their child for baptism, or when an individual presents themselves for baptism, we undertake this sacrament to acknowledge the love God has for that person. Baptism is a recognition not that we have chosen God but that God has chosen us. Whether you are male or female, rich or poor, young or old, black, brown, white, gay, straight, transgendered—baptism is a recognition that God loves you. In baptism we celebrate that you are a child of God, worthy of God's love. God has claimed you as God's own.

So, in baptism we recognize we are claimed by God. But we also acknowledge that we are *called* by God. Called to live as Christ's disciples. Called to walk the way of Christ. Called to love with Christ's love, forgive as Christ forgives, serve as Christ serves, be generous as Christ is generous. Baptism symbolizes washing away the old life and taking on the new life in Christ. Baptism then has implications for how we live our lives.

Think about what sometimes happens when a teenager heads out the door to go out for the night with friends. The parents of the adolescent might say to their child, "Remember who

you are.” Which means, remember the values we have imparted to you and conduct yourself accordingly. *That* is what baptism does for us. It tells us who we are and then shapes how we will live. Remember who you are: a child of God. Remember how you are to act: like a follower of Jesus, living out Jesus’ radical love. Baptism claims us in love and calls us to live out that love in our lives.

And what this then means is that baptism is intended for the living, not the dead. Baptism is a sacrament we perform for the living—so we will know that we are immensely loved and valued by our God. And the awareness of that love will then inform our lives. And baptism is conducted so we will know we are called to follow the way of Jesus, and that calling will shape all our priorities and actions.

In today’s reading, Jesus is baptized. Imagine with me how it felt for Jesus as he stepped into that river, how the soft mud oozed between his toes. Imagine him making his way through the water over to John the Baptist, stepping gingerly over the sharp river rocks, maybe even stubbing his toe against some unseen stone. Why did Jesus do this? Why was Jesus baptized?

Jesus entered those muddy waters because *we* are covered with the mud and muck of our mistakes and misdeeds and misfortunes. He entered those baptismal waters because *we* are walking around with stubbed toes, and wounded hearts, and damaged souls. Jesus entered those waters out of love for us, to stand with us in solidarity in the river of life. Jesus stands beside us in the muddy river of life to orient our lives toward love and show us how, despite the muck and the injuries, we can rise to know abundant life and to live with greater love.

Why was Jesus baptized? Love. Love is the answer to that question. Jesus entered those waters out of love for us. Baptism shines a light on God’s love for us and then calls us to love in

the same way Jesus loved us—with a radical, rule-breaking, generous, outlandish, risk-taking, self-sacrificing love. Jesus was baptized in order to be like us, so we can be like him.

And that means that baptism is a sacrament of love given for the living, not the dead.

So, remember the ordination question? Do you baptize the infant who has died? We seminary students were stressed by this question because the theological answer to this question would be no. The living need baptism, not the dead. And baptism is not needed to enter heaven. So, do we believe in baptizing the dead? No.

And yet, there is the right answer and then there is the *right* answer. We seminary students didn't yet grasp that notion, that there could be two right answers which would seemingly contradict one other. The examiners wanted to know that seminary students understood the theology of baptism, but they also wanted to see that the students responded with pastoral love and compassion. There is the right answer, and then there is the *right* answer.

I never faced this much feared ordination question when I sat down to take my exams. It wasn't on the exam. But one day, when I was working as an intern hospital chaplain, I was called to the neo-natal icu. An infant had died and the baby's parents wanted their child baptized. The exam question came to me after all. The baby was only a little larger than the palm of my hand in which I held him. And as I looked into those parents' grief-filled eyes, I knew the right answer. I explained to his parents that God's love for their baby was there all along—even before his baptism, even before his death. And then I broke the theological “rules” and baptized the tiny infant. Because Jesus taught us that the right answer is always love.