

BAPTISM OF OUR LORD: FORGIVENESS... AND SO MUCH MORE!

Jesus' baptism, which we typically take for granted as part of the biblical story and, for that matter, the church year – was actually quite scandalous. You can appreciate the logic. If baptism is for the remission of sin... and we confess Jesus was sinless... then why was Jesus baptized? Or, worse, are we contradicting ourselves: is baptism not about forgiveness, or was Jesus not sinless?

The early church, including the Evangelists, weren't quite sure what to make of baptism and found what we call "the Baptism of our Lord" at the very least uncomfortable, perhaps confusing, and possibly quite scandalous.

But I wonder if they – and by extension we – have it all a bit backwards. Oh, don't get me wrong, I think this whole thing is rather scandalous, too. But what strikes me is that rather than be shocked that Jesus is baptized **like we are**, maybe we should be surprised, shocked, scandalized, and even stunned by the fact that we are baptized **like Jesus is!**

A lot of the issue, revolves around forgiveness and its connection to baptism. Baptism is about forgiveness. Forgiveness is something we need. So we need Baptism. This much seems clear. But – and back to the original question – if Jesus doesn't need forgiveness then he doesn't need to be baptized, and so why is Jesus baptized?

But maybe we've misunderstood forgiveness a bit... and therefore the relationship between forgiveness and baptism... and therefore baptism itself. Let me see if I can break this down a bit.

Yes, baptism is about forgiveness. But it's also about relationship, about being named and claimed as children of God. And I think we often tend to think of forgiveness as a mechanism rather than a result, by-product or, most importantly, gift. That is, we can easily slip into thinking that God forgives us *in order that* we can be named, claimed, and called God's children. But I don't think that's accurate at all. God forgives us not to *make* us God's children but because *we already are* God's children. Forgiveness is a result of God's love for us, not a condition of that love. Forgiveness, to say it one more way, is the gift of a loving God and by-product of that love, not a mechanism by which to achieve it.

This confusion isn't linked only to forgiveness and baptism. We often make the same mistake when it comes to the law. God gives Israel (and by extension us) the Commandments – and the law more generally – in order that Israel/we can improve their/our behavior and, thereby, become God's people. But read the story carefully. God makes the promise of covenant and Israel enthusiastically accepts this promise in chapter 19 of Exodus, and then the Commandments are given in chapter 20. God doesn't give Israel/us the law *in order for* us to become God's children, that is, but *because we already are*. The Commandments are gift, not mechanism.

And it doesn't end here. The logic, again, is unmistakable: We are sinners. Sinners deserve punishment. Jesus, who is sinless and therefore doesn't deserve punishment, suffers it in our place on the cross. Jesus is our substitute. Therefore, Jesus' death on the cross is necessary for God to forgive us. Crystal clear, right?

But there are so many contradictions in this crystal-clear explanation that it's downright painful. I mean, if the cross is a necessary condition of forgiveness, then why does Jesus – and by extension God – forgive people throughout his ministry (and before he dies on the cross)? Moreover, is forgiveness really forgiveness if someone else suffers in your place? (I mean, if I default on my mortgage and you pay it for me, the bank hasn't forgiven me, it just found someone else to pay.) And do we really believe that God, as creator and sustainer of the universe, can't forgive absent violence and bloodshed and punishment? (Something, by the way, that we mere mortals seems to manage from time to time.)

All of which pushes me to confess that the cross isn't what *makes it possible* for God to love and forgive us, but rather that the cross is what happens because *already* God loves and forgives us. God in Jesus comes to offer us forgiveness out of love and we'd rather kill him than admit that we need forgiveness and love.

Okay, back to the Baptism of our Lord. Yes, Baptism is about forgiveness. But forgiveness is not a mechanism but rather is a gift. We aren't forgiven in Baptism *in order that* God can call us God's children, but rather we are forgiven because *we*

already are God's children. So, yes, baptism is about forgiveness. *But it's also about so much more!* It's about love, identify, affirmation, commitment, promise, and still more. In fact, I'd argue that Baptism is *first* about all these other things and *then*, as by-product and gift, about forgiveness. That is, in Baptism God proclaims God's great love for us; calls, names, and claims us as God's beloved children; gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit;...and then, because of God's love for us, God also promises to forgive, renew, and restore us at all times.

Which is why I think that what ought to surprise us is not that Jesus is baptized like we are, but rather that we get to be baptized – and therefore named as beloved child – just like Jesus is.

At his Baptism, Jesus hears God say these unbelievably important words of love, affirmation and identity: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the incredible, shocking, unexpected, and even scandalous thing is that in our Baptism, we hear the same thing: "You are my child, my beloved, and with you I am well pleased."

Those words – "you are my beloved child" have the power to change lives. May you experience forgiveness and love Beloved Child of God! Amen.