

Matthew 3:13-17, Colossians 3:12-17

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How many of you remember being baptized? Some of you probably do, but for many of you baptism occurred when you were an infant and you have no memory of it at all. I was baptized on Easter Sunday, 1959, in the First Methodist Church of Boulder, when I was about six months old. I have no memory of that event or of that church. When I was a young boy my family moved to Mountain View Methodist Church and that's the church I attended until I quit going to church altogether when I was 12. Remember how when Jesus was twelve he stayed behind without his family to have more time in the Temple talking with the elders and scribes and priests? I was the exact opposite, leaving the church at the earliest possible moment. That is until I was in high school and several friends took me to their youth group that was at the Presbyterian Church. My senior year in high school my best friend and I decided it was time to actually join the church. Now joining the church had nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that we were seniors and in order to be eligible for several college scholarships through the church we had to be actual members. That was pure coincidence. So we joined a new members class, the two of us and about thirty other people of all different ages. We met with the session and they asked us questions, one of which was, "Have you ever been baptized?" Of course I said, "Yes," because in Presbyterian and Reformed theology we don't baptize people more than once—we figure that God can work through any baptism, it doesn't have to be just Presbyterian. But I was surprised to hear about seven or eight of the other adults joining the church say that they had never been baptized. I wondered what it must be like to be baptized as an adult and have that moment, when on side of it, you were not and then all of a sudden you were. Does anything change?

The morning came when we were to join the church and first to be called forward were the people to be baptized and then all the others who were joining the church. Our senior pastor was very organized and since there were a couple of thousand members in this church he wasn't really expected to know everyone. Even for these baptisms he had small cards with everyone's name on them and invited the people up in order so he could be sure to baptize them with the right name. He started reading off the names to be baptized and the third one he read was "Mark Jennings." There was a mistake. I wasn't supposed to be baptized. What should I do? Should I just not go up? But then he'd come to the third person to be baptized and say "Mark William, I baptize you, etc." except that person would not be me. Or should I go up there and take several minutes away from the service and explain to Dr. Bob that he had made a mistake? That wasn't going to happen. Then my friend nudged me and said, "Just go up there." Go up there? And get baptized again? That can't be right. What would happen if I got baptized twice? Is it like a double negative, does the second wipe out the first? What would God think? But as is typical for me, I tried to follow the path of least embarrassment and least conflict so I went up with the others, knelt down and was baptized for the second time. And I do remember standing up after that, and wondering if I was now different some how. Should I feel different? Should I be acting differently? What was changed now from five minutes ago? Now I was baptized and I knew I was baptized. So what?

Baptism is a sign of God's grace. Let's be clear about this. One doesn't do a lot of good things so that one is now worthy of being baptized and accepted by God. God loves us and wants us to be part of his family, and baptism is a sign of that acceptance, whether one is an adult or a child, God's grace and love come first. The people who went out to be baptized by John did not have to show John their good works and worthiness to be baptized.

Jesus was baptized by John as a sign of who he was, his identity. That's what baptism is about for us as well. And that's what our stars are about also. When you came into church last week or when you came in today, you received a star. And some of those stars, like the stars we received last year are about things we can do, parts of the Christian life that we can work on. But unlike last year, there are some of the words that are not about what we should do, but about who we are. If you came in and your star word was "Chosen" or "Holy" or "Beloved," those are words that tell you of your identity, an identity that in the Christian faith we claim at our baptism.

You are chosen by God. God picked you. When it came time to choose up teams, you were picked. You are chosen. And because you're chosen, you are also holy. So what does it mean if you found the word "holy" written on your star? Frederick Buechner reminds us, "Only God is holy, just as only people are human. God's holiness is God's Godness. To speak of anything else as holy is to say that it has something of God's mark upon it. Times, places, things, and people can all be holy, and when they are, they are usually not hard to recognize." You have God's mark on you. You are holy because you belong to God. And you are chosen by God, and you belong to God because you are beloved. God loves you first and foremost.

So what? What does it mean to be chosen and holy and beloved?

Perhaps that's a good question for all of us. We are the church, the gathering of those whom God calls, those who are baptized in his name. How are we supposed to act, how are we supposed to be different from the world around us? I want to ask that question because I think there is some disagreement on what the answer is for the Christian church.

One of the great myths foisted on the church in the last quarter of a century is that the church is in decline. But in a lot of ways it is. The Presbyterian denomination has lost members every year and we have gone from three and a half million members to just under two million members

. The myth is that it is liberal, mainline churches that are declining like the Presbyterians and the Methodists and Episcopalians and that conservative churches that do their worship differently or market themselves more effectively are the ones that are growing. But I think that's painting the picture with too broad of a brush. There are Presbyterian churches that are growing. There are Episcopal churches that are growing. Christianity as a religion is growing, especially in the global south. What characteristics do these churches have in common? What does a growing church look like?

I ran into a friend of my the other day who is also a pastor. He pastors a very successful church about twice our size. He's a few years older than me and he said to me, "Are you looking forward to retirement?" That was a shocker. Do I look old enough to be retired? I told him no, that I had at least another 10 years before I could or would retire. He then asked me what I wanted to do with those 10 years. He said that his church had made a commitment to try to have a thousand members in the next ten years and how exciting it was to be part of a growing church. I want to take a moment here to be a little selfish. I started thinking, what do I want to do in the next few years? I have to admit that I'm really not very interested in being part of a church that is committed to growing numerically. I'm not really interested in being part of a church that is interested in growing the budget so that we are financially sound every year. Maybe those things will happen, but maybe not. What do I want to do with the next years of my ministry. What really interests me is being part of a growing church, and that has nothing to do with numbers or money. What really interests me is to be part of a church that is committed to growing spiritually as disciples of Jesus Christ, a church that commits itself to be a demonstration of the Kingdom of God in the world, a church that is committed to being an authentic community of learning and reaching out to each other and the world around us in love and grace under the lordship of Christ. Live like the chosen people, holy because God has put his mark on us, the beloved children of God. For that's who we are. That's who we are growing up to be.