

Counted

Matthew 3:13-17

Whitefish UMC

Baptism of the Lord, January 9, 2011

† In the story called "the River," Southern novelist Flannery O'Connor tells of the day that Bevel, a child of alcoholic and abusive parents, is taken to a baptizing by his babysitter, Mrs. Connin.

† O'Connor writes:

† *"Have you ever been baptized?" the preacher asked. "What's that?" he murmured. "If I baptize you," the preacher said, "you'll be able to go to the kingdom of Christ. You'll be washed in the river of suffering, son. You'll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?" "Yes," the child said, and thought, "I won't have to go back to the apartment then. I'll go on to the river." "You won't be the same again," the preacher said. "You'll count. . . ." And without more warning he tightened his hold and swung him upside down, and plunged his head into the water. He held him under while he said the words of baptism. Then he jerked him up again and looked sternly at the gasping child. Bevel's eyes were dark and dilated. "You count now," the preacher said. "You didn't even count before." The little boy was too shocked to cry. He spit out the muddy water and rubbed his wet sleeve into his eyes and over his face. "Don't forget his mama," Mrs. Connin called. "She's sick." "Lord," said the preacher, "we pray for somebody in affliction who isn't here to testify." "Is your mother sick in the hospital?" he asked. "Is she in pain?" The child stared at him. "She hasn't got up yet," he said, in a high dazed voice. "She has a hangover." The*

air was so quiet he could hear the broken pieces of the sun knocking on the water.

† “There is a river,” says contemporary Baptist preacher Bill Leonard, “full of little children and babysitters, holiness preachers and hung-over parents, where sinners become saints and where the no-account people count after all.

Christian baptism began at the river. John, the Baptizer, storms out of the wilderness demanding repentance of everyone, warning of the wrath that is to come. So Jesus shows up at the river, seeking baptism. John hesitates, but Jesus insists, and into, under, muddy Jordan he goes, taking all God's people with him.”

† **Have you ever wondered if you count? Were you ever the new kid in school, looking out over a sea of strange faces in the cafeteria, wondering where you could sit and not be ignored or laughed at?**

† **Are you perhaps a parent whose last child has gone off to college, and as you wander the upstairs hallway, looking at all the memorabilia left behind, you wonder what lies ahead, not only for your children, but for you?**

† **Have you looked forward to your retirement, or to that of your spouse, only to find yourself or your beloved struck down by a crippling illness, with nothing left to show for your days, feeling as if you, and your lives are no longer worth much?**

† **Did you make a mistake that changed your image of yourself and everyone else's opinion of you as well?**

† **Do I really count? Who am I? Where do I really belong? What gives me value? These are questions that never really go away. Whether we ask**

them explicitly or only subconsciously, we often look for the answers in all the wrong places—in our roles or work, in our peers, or our accomplishments or our acquisitions.

- † Ultimately, none of these answers deliver what we need and what really counts. What we really need, as today’s scripture affirms, is to hear how God gives us identity and value.
- † But if we are confused by all of this talk about baptism and identity, we are in good company. John the Baptist was even puzzled by how Jesus’ baptism came about. John’s baptism was one of repentance, and if Jesus was sinless, as we profess and the scriptures proclaim, why did he need to be baptized?
- † The scripture says, “John would have prevented him,” would have preferred not to have baptized Jesus. But Jesus says it should happen. The noted British scholar N. T. Wright is helpful in understanding why Jesus asked to be baptized, too. Wright says, “If Jesus is to fulfill God’s plan, this is how he must do it. By humbly identifying himself with God’s people.”
- † And that means being baptized, as we all are. “By humbly identifying himself with God’s people, by taking their place, sharing their penitence, living their life, and ultimately dying their death.”
- † And baptism only happens once in a life. We don’t believe in re-baptism, because we understand that it is God, not the church, who calls to us in our baptism—it doesn’t matter whether we are a tiny baby or an 80-year-old adult.

- † But the implications of our baptism are with us for our whole life. Baptism is a sign of welcome into this community and into Christ’s church. William Sloane Coffin describes what it is to become a member of the family of God. In one of his sermons, he says that “In joining a church you leave home and hometown to join a larger world. The whole world is your new neighbor and all who dwell there in black white yellow red—stuffed and starving, mighty and lowly—all become your sisters and brothers in Jesus.”
- † Probably the greatest privilege a pastor receives is administering the sacrament of baptism. “Administering” may be the official term for being the one to put the water on the baby or the child or adult’s head, to pronounce the prayers, and conduct the ritual, but that’s such a dry, bureaucratic term—it doesn’t even begin to cover what happens. Every pastor remembers her first baptism.
- † When I was in seminary, I served a little church in a very poor neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. We started serving breakfast before church on Sundays, and neighborhood children began coming for pancakes and staying for worship. Two little girls, maybe 8 or 9 years old, Heather and Jennifer, liked to come to “help.”
- † After doing a reaffirmation of baptism ritual (like the one we will do today), Heather approached me and said, “Pastor Debbie, I want to be bapetized.” After discussing it with my mentor and hunting down Heather’s mother (which was not an easy task and somewhat akin to the situation in Flannery O’Connor’s story) the day came for her baptism.

The neighborhood was mostly Catholic, and so Heather came in a relative's white first communion dress—but with no parents in sight.

- † The people of that wonderful but ragtag church gathered around the baptismal font, and I nervously began the ritual. I have no idea whether I said the right things, but I do know for sure that the radiance on Heather's face didn't come from my words. It came from the same Spirit that was present the day of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River.
- † After Heather's baptism, she took special pride in her role around the church. But just because she had been baptized, it didn't mean that her life became easy. On the next Christmas Eve, Heather's mom's boyfriend got drunk and stabbed a neighbor and was taken away in a squad car. She said she hid under the bed and prayed to Jesus to make the fighting stop. Later she ran over to the church and asked if she could have some bread and juice with Jesus.
- † Jesus' baptism didn't mean his life would be easy, either. In fact, it meant anything but that. Our baptism doesn't guarantee a reprieve from suffering or hardship or even death. But it does ensure that those hard things will be overcome by God's redeeming love through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
- † It means that along with our brother Jesus, we are always God's child, no matter what the world tells us about whether we count or not. I love this passage from City of Tranquil Light, which I told you about last week. As Will looks back on his life, he recounts this event:

† “Last week when I was sitting in the small reading room of the retirement home in which I live, a man selling Fuller brushes visited. It was a hot day, and the man was invited in for a glass of water. He looked to be about fifty years old. There were several of us in the reading room, and as the salesman approached and awkwardly began to show us his great variety of brushes—nailbrushes, hairbrushes, toothbrushes, scrub brushes, whisk brooms—I heard his difficulty with English, and because he was oriental I asked if he spoke the standard language, Mandarin. He nodded and I began to speak in our shared tongue, and when he asked my Chinese name and I gave it, he stared at me in wonder.

† “Mu shih,” he said urgently, Mandarin for shepherd-teacher—pastor—
”you baptized me and took me into church fellowship when I was a young man. I am your son.”

† Have you ever wondered whether you count? Remember your baptism, and know that you are counted as one of God’s beloved sons or daughters—forever and ever. Amen.

Sources:

Bo Caldwell, City of Tranquil Light. 2010

Rev. Dr. Bill Leonard, “The River,” <http://day1.org>

W. Carter Lester, Feasting on the Word. 2009