

The Baptism of our Lord
Mark 1: 4-11 "The Baptism of our Lord"
St. Matthew's Oconomowoc

1/07/07

Dear Friends in Christ,

As we look at the Gospel reading for this day we are going to focus our attention on that portion of the text that deals with Jesus' baptism. I guess it is a natural question for all of us to ask -- Why was Jesus baptized? If, as we have been taught, the purpose for baptism is repentance and forgiveness and for the establishment of faith in the heart, then why was it necessary for Jesus to be baptized? You heard John the Baptist in this morning's Gospel express his own surprise and amazement over this very question when he said: **After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.** John couldn't quite understand -- why should I be asked to bestow the forgiveness of baptism upon a Christ who does not need forgiveness? Even the greatest of the prophets, John the Baptist is confused. But Jesus is not. He understands his role. Let's take a look.

But John's was a servant's role. He had been sent, and his relationship to God was that of a servant. And his relationship to Christ was, therefore, also as a servant. And if Christ came seeking baptism of him, that is what John as a servant would do.

And that same thought applies to Jesus. His too was a servant role. He was sent, and he had come into the world, to be a servant. He had come into the world to serve the world by providing an effective salvation for the world. His own baptism was somehow connected with this. He didn't need baptism personally. He sought baptism as part of the fulfillment of his servant role. In spite of being the spotless, holy Prince of heaven he would be baptized into the ocean of our misery and the wretchedness of our sin to carry out his great role as the Servant God had sent to rescue us from all that is washed away in the waters of Baptism.

And right there is a message for us. Our baptisms, too, put us into a servant role. Not only did Jesus give up his life to bestow on us everlasting life, but also by taking on a servant role in baptism, Jesus provided a model to show us how, as we are baptized, we are now to live in relationship to other people -- in our families, in our jobs, wherever our respective lives take us.

To see and understand the model that Jesus provides us, we should recognize that a servant is not one who is lowly, who grovels, one who is someone other people generally walk on. A servant can be viewed that way, but to do so is really an injustice to the servant. In the context of the Christian faith, being a servant means being in support of someone else. In a Christian congregation, in a whole, big group of servants, the application is an obvious one -- we are a whole big group of people who practice being supportive of one another, and going out of our way to be supportive of one another, and lifting one another up in those times when we are feeling down. If we are not supportive of one another in our relationships, we are missing one of the major points of our baptism, and we are missing one of the major points of our Christian faith. Being faithful to Christ means living not just for ourselves at the center of our own circles but living also for those with whom we are in a relationship of faith. Jesus proved himself a servant by being baptized with a baptism that he really didn't need personally. He was baptized for our benefit, and his Father was well pleased.

Yes, many of our roles in our relationships with one another seem so often to be nothing more than servant work. Do it one week, and it only has to be repeated again the next. And who appreciates it? Who even bothers to say thank you? Mop the floors, vacuum the rugs, clean the toilets -- and the same mindless tasks have to be repeated again a week later, and then the week after that. Cut the grass, rake the leaves, shovel the snow, wash the car, pay the bills -- who even notices and who appreciates it? It helps to know that when a heavenly Father sees us carrying out our servant roles, he is also well-pleased as he was with his Son Jesus

John said that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Apparently this marked a significant difference from John's water baptism. As you know, the water wasn't replaced in Jesus' baptism, but there was this added matter of the Spirit. What does it mean to be baptized with the Holy Spirit? Some have felt that it means to be able to speak in tongues, or to have the ability to heal the sick.

The clearest statement of Scripture of what it means to be baptized by the Holy Spirit is in the apostle Paul's words in Galatians 5. Paul there speaks about the fruits of the Spirit. And these are the fruits of the Spirit that he lists: **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control.** And Paul lists these characteristics in vivid contrast to the person who lives a life of self-indulgence, who lives only for himself.

So Paul is talking about demonstrating these characteristics in our relationships as a result of our being baptized with the Holy Spirit. We have been passing through a time in history when a great deal of emphasis has been placed upon "me" and "my" and on the big "I" in each of us. In fact, some people have even called this the "me-first generation." We talk about "doing our own thing," and "getting ahead while we can." As we begin a new year we wonder, "How will this new year be a better one for me?" We are always at the center of our own circles.

Now look again at those fruits of the Spirit with which Paul says we have been empowered by our baptisms -- those characteristics that don't look to ourselves at the center of our circles, but which look to others who are in the circles of our relationships. Obviously it does not follow from our being baptized with the Holy Spirit that every day we live we will be totally loving, joyful, full of peace and patience, and all those other good virtues. We slip, don't we? We all fall short of the glory of God. But since we were baptized by the Holy Spirit, we also know that Christ died for us. Our baptism by the Holy Spirit enables us to live the full life God intends, the sanctified life that is part of Christian faith.

Amen.