

Now, some of you are worried about my voice, and you think, well, Jim, you've been hoarse for three weeks. Well, I was over it last week, but this team, I forget the name of it, last night played Duke, and beat them at home, which was very rude, very rude. Caroline and I both screamed a lot at the TV, and Caroline actually threw some things. We needed a new TV anyway so it's okay. We're Duke fans. That didn't go the way we expected.

Now, this Gospel text of the baptism of Jesus. You could hear this Gospel text as historical and theological and only about Jesus, and that would be distant and maybe a bit blurring and wrong.

At a certain retirement village, four widows were playing bridge. This did not happen at Wesley Commons. An elderly man that they had never seen before walked into the room, and one of the ladies said, "Well, hello. You're new here, aren't you?" The man smiled and said, "Yes, I just moved in this morning." The second woman spoke and said, "Where did you come from? Where did you live before moving here?" Matter of factly, the man said, "San Quentin. I was just released after serving a 30-year sentence." The third woman asked, "What were you in prison for?" The older man answered, "Murdered my wife." The fourth woman sort of perked up, and she said, "Oh! Then you're single!"

There is a point. We humans have the ability to listen selectively and just hear what we want to hear. Now, when it comes to Jesus' baptism, we listen for Him, and we see the odd character, John the Baptist, and we don't hear the staggering implication for ourselves. First of all, many of us confuse John's baptism with what we do, Christian baptism. That's wrong. What John did was an ancient Jewish practice of ritual immersion. Ritual immersion was required for all kinds of things. If you were a Gentile converting to Judaism, you had to go through a baptism of sorts called a mikvah. After childbirth, the same. After contact with a dead body, the same, and after certain diseases, the same. Immersion, a ritual bath or a mikvah, was required. John the Baptist was using this already existing Jewish tradition to call his contemporaries to repentance. He was using this ritual bath, this bath for purity, and he was saying to everybody, "You are all every one of you impure. You need to get cleaned up because the Messiah is coming, and He will wash you with more than water. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." John ordered his listeners to repent and change their ways. He came under fire from the Jewish leaders around Jerusalem because they didn't understand why he was asking good, upstanding Jewish folks to be baptized. In their minds, that was for people who had become unclean or for Gentiles who were converting. It was not for them. They thought if I'm a son of Abraham in good standing, I don't need anything else, but John made it clear. It does not matter who your mother and father are. The Messiah is coming and with Him, the Kingdom of God, and no one, no one is ready. No one is clean enough! No one is pure enough! No one is holy enough to enter on his or her own merits!

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When Jesus appeared before John, John knew that Jesus had no need of repentance, and he said, “Jesus, I should not baptize you, rather you should baptize me.” Something else, something bigger was going on. Just as the cross and the resurrection was on our behalf so was Jesus’ baptism on our behalf. Jesus saw John’s baptism as a way of putting Himself completely under the law. Jesus was crucified, you know, as if He was a sinner, and Jesus was also baptized as if He were a sinner. As Scripture explains in 2 Corinthians, “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

In a book entitled Baptism in the New Testament, Oscar Cullman writes, “It was not a baptism of repentance for His sins. It was a baptism of repentance for my sins and yours. Just as Jesus died on the cross not for His own sin, but for yours and mine, so also he was baptized in solidarity with and on behalf of you and me.” By submitting to John’s baptism, Jesus joined the people who acknowledged that their lives were totally messed up and empty and uncertain and in need of a new beginning. Jesus also publicly demonstrated the meaning that we talk about as Jesus’ symbolic name at Christmas, Emmanuel, God with us. You see, God has come to us, and God has joined us in this world and this human condition and this human predicament. God understands in Jesus Christ. God knows what life and temptation and a fear of death are like for you and me. He knows because of Jesus. See, our baptisms that we have participated in, they don’t echo John’s, they echo Jesus because Jesus came for us and was baptized for us, died for us, was resurrected for us. He is our righteousness. Then there’s that voice from Heaven, the voice that said, “Thou art my beloved son. With thee, I am well pleased.” That is for us, too.

I owe much of this insight to Larry Dunn in our Wesley Commons group. I am not too old to learn. I pondered this after we brought it up and discussed it a few weeks ago. The voice from Heaven saying to Jesus, “Thou art my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.” I started thinking about this some more. Larry was saying that was for us, too, but I wasn’t sure. The word translated “well-pleased” can also be translated “favor.” It’s vital in our understanding of what Jesus did for us. This whole phrase could be translated, as thou art my beloved child upon whom my favor rests. Now, we may think it’s only about Jesus because Jesus was so perfect, but that’s not what it’s about. It does not refer to the qualifications of the receiver, but to the all-encompassing attitude of the giver. God’s favor is also translated as “grace.” Totally undeserved, a totally free gift of His love, you see, this is for us. We relate to God in the same way. We are recipients of God’s undeserved grace, God’s unearned and unearnable favor. It rests upon us as baptized believers. Our recognition of that, of that approval, is a life-changing event, and some of us haven’t fully understood yet what God has done for us in Christ.

Scripture says plainly, and we preachers don’t preach it plainly enough, that your righteousness and mine earns us nothing in terms of God’s favor. God’s favor, God’s grace is a gift. Romans in the third chapter says that all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and we are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption, which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forth as the expiation by His blood to be received

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by faith, to be received by faith. Another verse where Paul echoes baptism as a part of the theme of grace or unearned favor is from Titus, “He saved us not because of deeds done by us in righteousness but in virtue of His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ, our Savior.”

I grow weary, I’m afraid to confess, I grow weary of people, even in church, who speak of being good enough to get into Heaven. I grow very weary. No one is good enough to make God owe you anything. Everything is God’s to begin with. The work, if we must frame it in terms of work, that impresses God is to believe, is to believe in the one whom God has sent, Jesus Christ. Through our faith in Jesus, the Messiah, we have God’s favor or God’s grace, and by Jesus’ baptism the whole journey was begun on our behalf. Jesus is the one upon whom God’s favor rests completely. As we take on Christ, take in Christ, we also take the favor, the grace upon ourselves – through our faith in Jesus Christ, not by being good enough. Baptism begins a praying on each of our lives. It’s a new beginning. God brought us into this world through the water of the womb, the ritual says, and also through the water of baptism. In baptism, God says definitely, clearly, and eternally, “You are my child. I am pleased to have you in my family. My favor, my grace is upon you.” Yes, even if you wander off – I think I can be bold to take it further into the parable from Luke – even if you wander off like the prodigal son to a far country and eat some pig slop, when you come back, when you come back, ashamed and filthy and world-weary, you will find God the Father with arms open, waiting. God will not disown you.

Now, understanding all of this ought to have an impact on the way we live. Knowing how we are loved by God ought to affect the way we live. Paul Tillich said to accept the fact that you are accepted and now live that out. In the words of the 14th Century Byzantine theologian, Nicolas Cabasilas, “The water of baptism destroys one life and reveals another. It drowns the old man and raises up the new.” To be baptized is to be born according to Christ. It is to receive existence, to come into being out of nothing. You are a new creation in the making. Like or not, live therefore not out of fear of punishment, but out of rejoicing that God’s favor, God’s grace is upon you. Baptism does mean that God’s mark is upon us. We are forgiven. We are sons and daughters of the Heavenly Father. We are kings and queens in union with Jesus Christ. We spend our lives living out and understanding who we are, growing by God’s spirit from faith to deeper faith, in union with the crucified and risen Christ, we are those who have died to sin and been raised to new life. Now we are called to act consistently with our baptismal identity. In one sense, Christian faith is accepting what God has said about you at your baptism and then living that out. You are my child, through my grace, through unmerited favor, you are my child. Now grow into that identity and I will sustain you and lead you by my spirit. Now grow!

William Barclay said, “Every day is a day of baptismal conversion, of dying and rising again with Christ, of taking new steps toward becoming more fully what the grace of God has called us to be, more truly what we are, a child of God.”

Some of you may have noticed in the news a few weeks ago, I think about two weeks ago, Western Union sent its last telegram. Did some of you see that? They're not in the telegram business anymore. You can't send a telegram even if you want to. They do only money orders. Back when the telegraph and telegrams were the fastest means of long-distance communication, there was a story that I really liked. It was about a young man who applied for a job as a Morse code operator in a telegraph office. He answered the ad in the newspaper, and he went to the address listed, and when he arrived, he entered a large, noisy office. In the background, the telegraph was clacking away. He signed in with the receptionist. He saw that there were seven other people there, and he was to wait to be summoned. He completed all his forms that he was to complete, and he looked around at the other people there. The applicants were kind of tapping their fingers and wobbling their feet and waiting to be called. All of a sudden, this young man just got up, and he walked straight into the office where the boss was. The other applicants, who were there first, looked at each other and said what is he doing? They took some satisfaction. They knew he would probably be tossed out and never get the job. That was one more chance for them to get it. In a few minutes, that's now what happened. The young man emerged from the boss' office, and the boss announced to the other applicants, "Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming, but the job has been filled by this young man." The other applicants grumbled to each other, and one of them said, "Wait a minute! I don't understand. He was the last one to get here, and we have never even been interviewed. That's not fair! Why did you hire him?" The boss responded, "While all of you sat there, the whole time, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message, "If you understand this message, come right in, the job is yours."

The light, the Christian light, depends upon your ability to discern the meaning of these words: "You are my child whom I love, upon whom my favor, my grace rests." Through our faith in Jesus Christ, who went first on our behalf through the waters of birth and baptism and through the cross and the resurrection, we too are recipients of God's favor, God's unmerited grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Feel the weight of that gift, of that favor, of that grace, and live accordingly as a son or a daughter of God. Amen.