

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

“Called by Name” by Mat Taylor

In *Feasting on the Word*, The Reverend Carter Lester poses the following situations to us:

A new student enters crowded cafeteria. He stares into a host of unfamiliar faces. None seem welcome. His palms grow sweaty. He wonders where he should take his seat. He wonders where he belongs. He feels as if he doesn't belong anywhere.

A mother looks into her youngest daughter's room. Her daughter is now a young woman off in college. The room is filled with pictures and memories and little histories of childhood and high school, yet her daughter's absence gives the room a strange emptiness. The pillows in the room still smell like her daughter. That scent brings with it a flood of emotion. The mother's eyes fill with bittersweet tears. She wonders what her daughter's future holds. She wonders what her own future holds, too.

An older man groans in his sick bed. Retired now from his successful law practice, he now finds himself felled by chronic illness. Now his days are filled with pain, bed wetting, and confusion. His former life now seems so far away that it might as well have belonged to someone else. He feels utterly useless. What is he good for now? He fears that he's become utterly worthless.

A younger man drives toward his hometown. He has been away for two years in a minimum-security prison for misappropriating money at work. As he drives home, freed now from prison having served his sentence, he wonders if now his sentence really begins, fearing that his reputation's been damaged for a lifetime.

Who am I? Where do I belong? What makes me worthy? These are not simply the questions of adolescence; these are the questions which nag at us for a lifetime, tugging at us, waking us up at night. Sadly, we often find our answers to these questions in all the wrong places—in our roles, our work, our peer groups, our accomplishments or acquisitions. But none of these things can ever definitively answer such questions.¹

What if we found the answer to these questions, not in all the usual places, but in our baptism? Does baptism not tell us who we are, where we belong, and what makes us worthy?

Like many of you, I can't remember the day of my Baptism. I do, however, remember the little black and white picture of my baptism that hung in the hall of my childhood home. My mom and dad were posed with me in their arms, and beside them was a strange man I had never laid eyes on in my life. He was dressed up like a clergyman. Who is that man? I'd ask. They'd tell me that that's the man that baptized me.

¹ This section of material is drawn heavily from *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Volume 1, pages 218 & 220.

I was disturbed by this. Being a preacher's kid, I wanted my own dad to have baptized me. "That's Dr. Sims," they'd tell me. I was suspicious. Preacher's kids grow up thinking their mom or dad is the only pastor in the world. "Why didn't dad baptize me?" I'd ask. "Your father wanted to be your dad when you were baptized, not your pastor."

That answer never made more sense to me than on the day my own child was baptized. Standing as my child's father, declaring on his behalf the vows of baptism, was one of the most meaningful and amazing moments of my life.

As Presbyterians, we practice infant baptism. As a consequence, most of us born-and-raised Presbyterians can't remember the day of our own baptism. We may witness the baptism of others and hear stories of our own baptism, but apart from stories and pictures we have no lived memories of that most sacred of moments.

No doubt, a great many Christians reject the practice of infant baptism, Baptists being chief among them.

The debate between the practitioners of infant baptism and those opposed to it is quite an interesting one. Those opposed often argue that in the New Testament only believer baptism is practiced, for even Jesus, as we read this morning, was a man of 30 years when he was baptized.

On the face of it, this seems true, but defenders of infant Baptism point out that in some cases whole families are baptized, opening up the possibility that some infants or young children were thus baptized when the matriarch or patriarch of the family was baptized.

While the earliest Christians seem to have practiced believer baptism almost exclusively, infant baptism was certainly practiced by the 2nd and 3rd centuries and is mentioned by Irenaeus, Origen, and Tertullian.

Over time, it becomes an extremely critical part of the church's sacramental life. In historic, traditional Catholicism, baptism is necessary for salvation, such that un-baptized infants are condemned to a shadowy existed called Limbo. If a newborn infant is critically ill, it becomes incumbent upon a priest to perform an emergency baptism in order to insure that the infant will not be condemned to Limbo.

There is a heart-rending scene in Thomas Hardy's novel "Tess of the D'urbervilles." Tess is a poor, victimized young woman who gives birth to a sickly boy who only lives but a week. She begs to have him baptized, but her own father prevents it, so she baptizes the boy herself. She names him "Sorrow" and places the child in an unconsecrated grave and lays flowers by him in an old marmalade jar.

When I read that story in college I cried for days when I thought about it. It's a fictional story, I know, but I can't help but think that such stories were profoundly common in bygone days. I've been told that the nuns under the direction of Mother Teresa would often conduct emergency baptisms if a child was dying and no priest was present. I have

no idea if this is true or not, nor do I know how such actions would be judged by the Catholic hierarchy of that day.

It's worth noting that the Catholic Church no longer takes this position. Today the Catholic Church teaches that "Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament" and that, since "God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacrament."

In 2007, the church "did away" with the concept of Limbo once and for all and declared that there is much reason to hope and believe that un-baptized infants are saved.

The positions of the Catholic Church these days are not that different from us Presbyterians. Nevertheless, baptism remains a tricky subject.

I learned this the hard way at a Presbytery meeting not long ago. I was charged with asking a candidate seeking entrance into our presbytery a question concerning the sacraments. I asked the candidate to share his thoughts on the sacrament of infant baptism vs. believer baptism. The candidate did a fine job answering the question, but a number of smarty pants voiced their dislike of how I formed the question.

One fellow stood up and declared that there's no such thing as the sacrament of infant baptism, there's just the sacrament of baptism, and some of the folks we baptize happen to be infants.

As if that wasn't enough, the clerk of these proceedings then had to stand up and parrot these same sentiments in his own words.

If felt dumped upon and for no good reason. I had never meant to suggest that infant baptism is categorically different from believer baptism. It seemed they just wanted to argue over semantics, not substance. Of course, they were right in what they said, there is but one sacrament of baptism, but neither I nor the candidate who answered my question meant to suggest anything different.

I was fuming by the time I got back to Jackson. I did what all good Presbyterian pastors do in such a situation—I turned to my beloved John Calvin, and guess what I found, he has an entire chapter of his institutes of Christian Religion entitled "On the Sacrament of Infant Baptism."

I've wanted to ask that question again at a Presbytery meeting, and when some supercilious know-it-all objects, I can tell him to go brush up on his John Calvin and leave me alone.

It's interesting also, that the most important Reformed theologian of the 20th Century disagreed with these men. Karl Barth was surprisingly critical of the practice of infant baptism. At one point he called it a "wound in the body of the church." He criticized it

as “arbitrary and despotic” and described it as a “hole” in baptismal practice. Barth felt that both baptism and communion were declarations or incarnations of the word of God.

John Howard Yoder notes that

“Modern Baptists reject infant baptism because an infant cannot have a born-again experience; sixteenth-century Anabaptists rejected it because an infant cannot commit herself to the covenantal process of binding and loosing under the Rule of Christ. But for Barth the significant variable is the baptizand’s capacity to be a receiver of the Word. That does not require adulthood; but it cannot be a newborn. The Word cannot be heard by proxy.”

Barth’s criticism is a difficult one, one that mainstream churches have been apt to ignore rather than confront. For Barth, there is a very real difference in the act of baptizing an infant rather than an adult.

Perhaps he is correct in this, even though I believe his conclusion is wrong.

When we are honest, we must admit that there is something categorically different, theologically speaking, when one allows infants to receive the sacrament of baptism vs. exclusive believer baptism.

Barth realized this and rejected the practice.

When baptism is extended exclusively to those who have come to understanding and acceptance of the faith, it is a sacrament given in response to faith.

When baptism is administered to an infant, it is given prior to faith in hope that faith will grow in the heart of that child.

Often churches give Bibles to high school graduates. I have always loved this practice. The Bible given to me by my home church upon my graduation is very special to me. So I always like to give Bibles to our high school graduates. But, in truth it’s a strange practice. Wouldn’t it be better if the church gave a child a Bible long before graduation?

Wouldn’t it be far superior if the church gave a child a Bible even before that child could read, in anticipation of that child learning to read?

Here’s where Barth’s logic breaks down for me. If the sacrament of baptism is an act in which the word of God is declared, then should not we baptize infants so that they are molded by the word of God throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood?

When a church chooses to only baptize believers, it appears that God’s grace is given to us conditionally. We must first choose to believe and accept, and then we become born again, and only then are we fit for baptism.

The baptism of an infant, however, reverses this and puts the emphasis on God’s grace. It is God’s grace that chooses us, long before we are even capable of choosing God. It is

in fact, God's grace that even allows us to come into the fullness of faith and choose God for ourselves.

Ultimately, there is but one baptism. Infant baptism is in no way superior to believer baptism, nor is it inferior. In our Reformed faith, baptism always is about God's grace in our lives and it is the primacy of this grace that really matters and makes all the difference in the world.

I began this sermon with a series of questions. Who am I? Where do I belong? What makes me worthy?

The Reformed Theology of baptism provides simple, powerful answers:

Who are you? You are a child of God?

Where do you belong? You belong among the people of God?

What makes me worthy? It's not your accomplishments, your abilities, your wisdom—
It is the spirit of Christ dwelling within you.

Simple answers to difficult questions.

Remember that in baptism, you belong to God.

Amen.