
THE POWER OF “YOU”

If you compare the four Gospels, all of which record the Baptism of JESUS, you’ll find that when GOD speaks to JESUS, Matthew’s Gospel says, “This is my SON, whom I love,” Mark and Luke Gospels say, “YOU are my SON, whom I love,” and John’s Gospel doesn’t have GOD saying anything.

- No big deal, right?
 - But why might Mark and Luke have used the first person “YOU” instead of the third person “This”?
 - What’s at stake for them?

I want to think today about Luke’s presentation of JESUS in this way in light of what Luke emphasizes throughout his Gospel.

- For Luke, the “YOU” to JESUS represents the “you” that GOD, in JESUS, says to all people:
 - those persons we see when we look around us;
 - those persons we easily pass by and overlook;
 - and those persons we don’t want to see.

This is a core theme in the Gospel of Luke.

- GOD sees the ones no one else does.
 - GOD sees the lowly shepherds and invites them to JESUS’ birth.
 - GOD in JESUS see the widow of Nain, burying her only son.
 - JESUS sees Zacchaeus up in a tree.
- Even the parables JESUS tells are about people whose goodness is defined by coming nearer, and seeing those whom most of us refuse to see.
 - In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan (who is never called “good”, by the way) is good because he draws nearer and truly sees the guy in the ditch.
 - The priest and the Levite see, but then choose not to see.
 - They do not see one for whom JESUS came.
 - They are unwilling to see those whom they themselves have excluded from GOD’s favor.

Never underestimate the power of “You,” especially in the second person singular.

- We know how “you” feels.
 - Like you’re the only person in the world.
 - Like someone is paying attention to you.
 - Like someone means it and means what they say.
- Of course, its negative is equally powerful, but for the sake of this week’s Gospel reading, I’m focusing on “you” in the positive.
 - I want us to think about what “you” feels like when we hear it from GOD.

The remarkable thing about the “YOU” that GOD speaks to JESUS is that as soon as we hear it, we are called to see, to acknowledge, and to come nearer.

- And when we do, we can’t help but be moved to then see any and every “you” for whom GOD shows regard:
 - the regard of GOD for Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptizer;
 - the regard of GOD for Mary— “Greetings, *you*...who are highly favored. The LORD is with...*you*.”
- To hear “you” is to be regarded, to be favored by GOD.
 - That’s what “you” should feel like.
 - And that “you” is the “you” you are called to say, in JESUS’ name, to others.

How does Luke's presentation of JESUS' baptism invite us to think about baptism in a specific way;

- in a way that might even look forward to what JESUS' baptism truly means for HIS ministry,
 - and what it means, for anyone who chooses to follow JESUS?

But, let me take a few minutes to talk about something else with regard to the baptism of JESUS, which may have crossed the mind of some of you,

- something that actually is quite scandalous.

If baptism is for the remission of sin...and we confess and believe that JESUS was without sin...why then was JESUS baptized?

- Or, worse, are we contradicting ourselves: is baptism not about forgiveness, or was JESUS not sinless?

And that apparent confusion, combined with a similar confusion about John the Baptizer (he can't/mustn't/won't allow himself to be seen as having authority over JESUS, even though he's the one doing the baptizing) leads to some general confusion about baptism.

- All the Gospels record John declaring JESUS' superiority, and make clear that John is more or less the facilitator of the baptism, while the HOLY SPIRIT is the true agent.

So, you get the sense that the early church, including the Gospel writers, weren't quite sure what to make of baptism and found what we call "The Baptism of Our LORD" at the very least uncomfortable, perhaps confusing, and as I said, possibly quite scandalous.

But I wonder if they—and by extension we—have it all backwards.

- Oh, don't get me wrong, I think this whole thing is rather scandalous, too.
- But what strikes me is that, rather than being shocked that JESUS is baptized like we are,
 - maybe we shouldn't be surprised, shocked, scandalized, and even stunned by the fact that we are baptized like JESUS is!

A lot of the issue revolves around forgiveness and its connection to baptism.

- Baptism is about forgiveness.
- Forgiveness is something we all need, so we need baptism.
 - Yet if JESUS doesn't need forgiveness, then HE doesn't need to be baptized. So, why is JESUS baptized?
- But maybe we've misunderstood forgiveness a bit, and therefore the relationship between baptism...and therefore baptism itself.
 - Confused yet? Let me see if I can break this down a bit.

Baptism *is* about forgiveness.

- But it's also about relationship, and being named and claimed as children of GOD.
 - I think we tend to see forgiveness as a mechanism rather than a result, by-product or, most importantly, gift.
 - That is, we can easily slip into thinking that GOD forgives us so that we can be named, claimed, and called GOD's children.
 - But I don't think that's accurate at all.
- GOD forgives us, not to *make* us GOD's children, but because we are *already* GOD's children.
 - Forgiveness, is a result of GOD's love for us, not a condition for that love.
 - Forgiveness, to say it one more way, is the gift of a loving GOD—something we receive because of GOD's love—not the way by which to achieve it.

This confusion isn't linked only to forgiveness and baptism.

- We often make the same mistake when it comes to the law.
- We seem to think that GOD gives Israel (and by extension us) the Commandments, and the law more generally, in order that Israel and we can improve their/our behavior,
 - and thereby, become GOD's people.

But read the story carefully.

- GOD made the covenant and the promise of the relationship that comes with it, and Israel enthusiastically accepts this promise,
 - and then the Commandments are given.
- GOD doesn't give Israel/us the law in order for them and us to become GOD's children, because we already are.
 - The Commandments are a gift, not the mechanism by which we become GOD's children.

We are God's children, and then are given the law as a gift.

Okay, back to the Baptism of our LORD.

- Yes, Baptism is about forgiveness, but forgiveness is not a mechanism but rather a gift.
- We aren't forgiven in Baptism *in order that* God can call us children, but rather we are forgiven *because* we already are GOD's children.
 - So, yes, baptism is about forgiveness, but it's also about so much more.
 - It's about love, identity, affirmation, commitment, promise, and still more.
 - In fact, I'd argue that Baptism is first about all these other things and then, as a by-product and gift, about forgiveness.
 - That is, in Baptism, GOD proclaims GOD's great gift of love for us;
 - calls, names, and claims us as GOD's beloved children,
 - gives us the gift of the HOLY SPIRIT,
 - and then, because of GOD's love for us, GOD promises to forgive, renew, and restore us at all times.

Which is why I think what ought to surprise us is not that JESUS is baptized like we are, but rather that we get to be baptized—and therefore named as beloved children—just as JESUS is.

- At His Baptism, JESUS hears these unbelievably important words of love, affirmation, and identity: "YOU are my SON, whom I love; with YOU I am well pleased."
 - And, in the same way, we hear this message at our baptism.
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A family was baptized at a Lutheran Church in the Twin Cities.

- During the baptism, when the pastor said to the mother of the family, "You have been sealed by the HOLY SPIRIT and marked with the cross of Christ forever," tears streamed down her face.
 - You see, this woman, before hearing these words, had never imagined that GOD's love could be for her.

That is the power of "you."

Baptism is GOD's claim of "you."

- After preaching that message once, a woman I will call Dot, came and asked me, "Is that really true? That GOD baptizes you and claims you?"
 - "Yes," I replied. "That's what we believe."
 - Dot told me why she doubted the "you."

She had a sister, born too early and not expected to live, about three years before Dot was born.

- The only option Dot's parents had was to bring the baby home for her two-to-three-month lifespan.

During that time, the grandmother baptized the baby.

- Then she died and her parents set up a meeting with the pastor for the funeral.
 - The pastor told them that he would do the funeral, but not in the sanctuary, because *he* had not baptized the baby.
 - The funeral was held in the basement of the church.
- Dot asked me, “Do you mean my sister is okay?”
 - The sister she never met.
 - The sister she had mourned for her entire 90 years.
 - The sister for whom she wondered, “Is GOD really for her?”
- “Yes,” I replied. “The “you” spoken to your sister—GOD claimed her as GOD’s own.”
 - And GOD will never let her go.

That’s the power of “you” when spoken to us by GOD in baptism.

- GOD claims you and calls you GOD’s own.
- GOD names you GOD’s child and tells you—*you*—are chosen, and claimed, and loved.
 - Oh, and as a gift, you are also forgiven.
 - But, first and foremost, baptism is the message that you—*you*—are GOD’s own child, whom GOD truly and deeply loves.