

Meeting Ourselves at the Water
Matthew 3:13-17
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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There is something about water.

Just in our congregation there are several of you who I hear tell stories of kayaking in places ranging from Lake McBride to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. There is one couple among us who fell in love with sailing, went to sailing school, and for the last couple of years has been sailing with greater frequency. Even water exercise is popular among us, and I can't help but think that the attraction is about more than taking care of our joints.

This last summer my family and I traveled to Wisconsin and Michigan visiting Door Co, WI, Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and then spending a few days on Mackinac Island. While I am not a water sports person, there was a point on our trip when I was able to articulate that I love being near the water. I may never need to own a ski boat and am typically happier staying dry, but I feel something different in my soul when I am near the water, listening to it lapping against the shore, feeling the breeze blow over it.

Water seems to be a balm for our souls. And perhaps that shouldn't surprise us. After all, water sustains us as we grow before birth in the womb. Water hydrates us and in doing so offers us better sleep, faster healing, and a healthier mind and body. Water washes us, leaving us feeling fresh and ready for whatever comes next.

And it is in water where we are baptized.

And baptism holds within it so much meaning, so many different aspects of significance. If asked, "What is baptism about?" I suspect all of us would have more than one answer and among us there would be a great variety of answers.

For some the first thing that would come to mind is purification. After all, Christian baptism is deeply rooted in Jewish purification practices.

For some the first thing that would come to mind is forgiveness. Another type of purification in itself, the focus on forgiveness often springs from a desire to be in right relationship with God, to turn away from all that separates us from God and to turn back toward God. And if we had read a little earlier in Matthew's gospel we would have seen that John's baptism was a baptism of forgiveness.

For some the first thing that would come to mind is salvation as Christian belief, especially in some traditions, has spoken of baptism as a requirement to eternal life.

For some the first thing that would come to mind is belonging. After all, baptism is not a private act, but a community ritual, a time when the community and the one being baptized claim each other as they journey together in faithfulness.

For some the first thing that would come to mind is commitment. After all, especially in traditions like ours that practice believers' baptism, the one being baptized not only accepts God's gift of grace in baptism but also makes their own commitment to use their gifts for the good of the church and the world.

For some the first thing that would come to mind is belovedness. Baptism is a public ritual where we name aloud God's claim on each of us, that we are each God's beloved children.

And while there are good reasons to consider all of our different understandings of baptism, while it is good to have significant conversations about the varied meanings of the act of baptism, I sometimes wonder if we too often put the focus in the wrong place.

I say this because over history baptism has sometimes been used as a way to point people toward their sin in order to scare them into submission. Baptism has sometimes been used as a tool to convert the masses, less out of interest in developing deep relationships with God and more out of the desire to increase the church's numbers and power. Baptism has sometimes been used as a way to divide people into "us" and "them."

But today we read about Jesus' baptism and we can't help but notice what his experience was.

Verses 16 and 17 read, "And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'" (Matthew 3:16-17, NRSV).

And so often we read that and we think it is *only* about Jesus. We read it and we assume that it is simply a claim of *his* identity before he starts his public ministry.

But what if God makes that same claim on all of us?

Because if we are paying attention, we, too, are called children of God. If we are paying attention, Jesus invites us into the same work that he does. If we are paying attention, Jesus offers us the same power. Often we are reluctant to accept or claim these truths. Often we find it easier to think of ourselves as less than, as deeply flawed, as very different from Jesus.

But, what if the story of Jesus' baptism isn't just about him, but is also an invitation to us? What if we are invited to be so centered in God that we too hear God's voice and

sense God's presence all around us? And what if, in doing so, we realize that God is claiming us, too?

What if, every time we touched water...washing our hands, feeling the stream of shower water wash over our bodies, diving into a pool or lake, feeling cold water wash over our lips and down our throats as we swallowed, standing under a waterfall, dragging our fingers across the water's surface from a paddleboard...what if every time we touched water we were reminded of God's love for us?

What if we made the commitment to live connected to God, to center ourselves in God's Spirit, in such ways that we could see in ourselves, in each other, and in the world, what God sees? What if we lived as open channels to God's love and in doing so were able to sense the claim of belovedness that God has already put on us?

Friends, you belong to God. And God loves you deeply. You do not have to earn it or deserve it. God has called you beloved, absolutely, no exceptions.

And what if that were the central claim of baptism? Because while baptism is about many things, it begins with God's love. So, what if at the heart of it, baptism is an invitation to not only meet God, but also to meet ourselves - our true selves, deeply beloved - at the water?

And what would our lives look like...what would our world look like...if we knew deep down inside, without a doubt, that we were God's beloved?

Friends, it is true. God loves you. God loves you deeply and unconditionally. Let the water be a reminder...let it encourage you...that you may see yourself and others as beloved children of God. Amen.