
Love Dove

Matthew 3:13-17

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 12, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

It's never quite a normal day when Jesus is around. I know it looks like his cousin, John the Baptist, is the weirdo in the wilderness with his GQ camel's hair and leather belt around his waist, but Jesus seems to be the odd one doing odd things, again. He approaches John to be baptized and John recognizes the oddity of this and says, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" The one who is more powerful than John goes to him. The superior submits to the inferior. Jesus does some odd things and he justifies it as being the "proper" thing to do to "fulfill all righteousness," God's will. We've always thought of Jesus as "proper" and sticking to the status quo. That's the first thing that usually comes to mind. Right? That's what we really need in a God—to be proper and follow appropriate protocol and procedure, a type A personality. Jesus is many things but I'm not sure being proper is one of them.

It's never quite a normal day when Jesus is around. Water is never quite the same when the presence of Jesus is in its midst. Take the river Jordan as an example. It becomes a baptismal pool of living water with his presence. "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.'" Water is never quite the same when the presence of Jesus is in its midst.

There have always been many meanings of baptism. And you should know that I love baptism because I'm a Baptist! Baptism a rite of initiation into the kingdom of God. It involves repentance. Confession of sins. It may signify washing or cleansing. Entry into the family of God as son or daughter. Being loved and accepted by God. Anointed and baptized by the descending Spirit. It is spiritual empowerment for life. Many meanings. The Spirit descending like a dove on Jesus marks him as the Messiah, the Son of God, the promised servant of Isaiah (ch 42) and signifies the beginning of his public ministry and the dawning of a new age. All of this through water in the presence of Jesus. And in Christ's baptism, we see our own. Through him, we are buried through baptism into his death and raised with him into new life. We don't become messiahs but we are messengers, witnesses, of the Messiah, as we see and hear anew, as our spiritual senses are sparked by water.

Baptism is a sensuous practice, enlivening our spiritual senses. Through his baptism, Jesus sees the Spirit's descent and hears "a voice from heaven." Just as the heavens are opened, baptism opens our eyes and ears to see and hear God. It opens us up to a new reality in the world. This new reality even touches us as baptismal waters wash over our skin—our foreheads and hands and arms and bodies. We smell the difference, the fragrance of grace. We taste that the Lord is good through baptism. This heightened sensory mode is the reason for some rushing to the water to get baptized. We want this whole new world opened to us.

Some will dive into it, literally. A pastor stands in a baptismal pool in a church. He baptizes a teenager by immersion in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That teen departs the pool up the stairs and the next teen is ready to descend the stairs for his baptism. He's so excited to be baptized that this teen decides to jump into the baptismal pool rather than taking the stairs. Splashing water everywhere, even on the pastor. Let's just say the pastor wasn't so happy. But this kid was thrilled that he created what is now called the cannonball baptism. Some can't wait to get into the water so they run and jump into it. But there are others who run from it.

Like that child who doesn't want to take a bath at night though they're covered with mud from head to toe so the parent has to command them to get into the water. Water is not always enticing. Water can even be dangerous and deadly. Children drowning in backyard pools unaware of its power. Drastic hurricanes and tsunamis creating floods that destroy homes and entire towns. Bloating bodies floating in these tumultuous waters. People frantically running away from rising water, climbing to top of buildings, pleading to be rescued, waving their hands and anything they can get ahold of, screaming "Help! Help!" Water can be a threat.

But for others, it's a rare treat. Water is a precious commodity in regions suffering from droughts where there is no water and people sorely yearn for some. When your pipes freeze and there's no running water in your house, the gift of water is once again noticed. When water is absent, we may realize how much we need its presence to survive, to live.

When one is parched, a cool drink of water is salvation. We thirst for living water, which is why in the church we want to run to the water in the presence of Jesus and sing as they do at Union Baptist Church on Pennington Avenue in Trenton, NJ. "Take me to the water, take me to the water, take me to the water to be baptized." This ecclesial chant reveals our hunger for water, our thirst for life. Take me to the water. We run to the water where Jesus is because he is the one who can quench our spiritual thirst. As Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well, "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Candidates for baptism say like the Samaritan woman, "give me this water"(John 4). Take me to the water. Like John, "I need to be baptized by you" because it's at the water with the presence of Jesus in its midst that we discover living water, a fountain flowing deep and wide with love. In the end, that's what we really are thirsty for anyway—love. The Samaritan woman had five husbands and was living with another one but she was still thirsty for water, for baptismal love.

Baptism is many things but it is a sacrament of love, an outward sign of an invisible grace. Water flowing with love to quench human desire. When God speaks, we learn that Jesus is God's *beloved* Son, not just his Son. God loves Jesus. God loves the world (John 3:16). Through baptismal waters, God demonstrates love for us because these waters of Jordan are kissed by divine love. Baptism opens us up to the fact that it is God's doing as the heavens open, the Spirit descends, and God speaks. Through baptism, God claims us as beloved children. Love will not be silent so God like a proud Father broadcasts to the whole world and breaks the silence and testifies about Jesus, his beloved Son. Love cannot be contained when it is real. It has to be voiced and signified. The washing of the water over and on one's body is a sign and mark of God's love. Baptism is God's caress of love, a signature of love penned by God's Spirit, who is the bond of love between the Father and the Son (St. Augustine). So the Spirit's descent like a dove is the descent of love, love coming down to earth to embrace the Son of God in a heavenly hug.

This same Spirit of God who swept over the face of the waters at creation (Gen 1) creates something new and renews us through loving water. As God claims us as beloved children through baptism we can become who God desires us to be through love, not judgment. God forms and transforms us in and through love in order to love. This is not just any run-of-the-mill water; this is water with Jesus in its midst. Things are never quite normal when Jesus is around. Water becomes love and has a redeeming quality in the presence of the Spirit of Christ. Baptism reveals that we are washed in the love of the Lamb and love covers a multitude of sin in the same way that water washes over our whole body.

This may shed light on why a woman whose body has been violated may go into the shower to wash herself, not only to feel clean, but to feel love again, and to engage in a defiant ritual act of washing away sin, not her sin, but of the perpetrator. In this context, washing in the water of a shower can be renewing, refreshing, and reclaiming one's body for oneself. To shower or to bathe can be an act of self-love. A warm bath is known to relieve stress and be calming and healing. Bathing then is not just about cleansing; it's about loving. For a hospice patient, receiving a loving bath may be the most intimate, caring, delicate, act

of human dignity that they may ever receive. In those moments, water becomes the baptismal love of God as its flowing and washing embody love.

That baptism is a practice of love is vital but even more so it's critical that baptism is a seal of love *on our bodies*. The new reality opened up to us through sight and sound as the heavens are opened also touches our skin, affirming a sensory Christian spirituality in which God embraces the human sensorium. God embraces our whole bodies through baptism. Baptism says what we do with our bodies matter and God wants to know us in and through our bodies; it's a somatic epistemology, thus we are not, in the words of retired Princeton speech professor Bill Brower, "a head on a stack of books." We're holistic beings and we want to be whole which is why we have a wellness center at Duke and talk about integrative education. It's the realization that our bodies matter, even in the Christian life. Moreover, baptism signals an environmental epistemology that through water in the presence of the Spirit of Christ we come to know God, and particularly God as love. God uses material means to reveal Godself to us—a baby's body in Bethlehem, bread, wine, water.

This wet liturgy of love that we call baptism loves all of us, despite the distorted body image issues in society. Baptism affirms our physical bodies as a significant aspect of Christian discipleship thus we cannot escape our bodies to follow Jesus, nor should we want to, if we believe in the resurrection of the body. Christian faith is lived in and through our baptized bodies that have been showered with love by God, washed in water of love.

Water is never quite the same in the presence of Jesus. We're never the same in his presence because through his baptism of the Spirit, our bodies become temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:14).

The day is never quite normal when Jesus is around. Neither is today. Bodies have been loved so deeply by God through the waters of baptism but this doesn't mean that we won't have trouble at some point. Notice that Jesus experiences bodily temptation in the wilderness right after his baptism and it's the same Spirit of love that led him there. God's love may be tough but it is also tender in affirming, "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench..." (Is 42). The water of baptism is worth it. Swim in it. Bathe in it. Wash in it. And the next time you splash water on your face to wash it in the morning, don't just remember the cannonball baptism, remember your baptism and the love of God.