

## **Not Worthy**

A Baptism of the Lord Sermon by Rob Hamilton

Delivered on January 09, 2022

Matthew 3:13-17 Revised Standard Version

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 15 But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; 17 and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

## **Intro**

Grace and Peace to you today. I am so grateful we can share in worship together, no matter how or when you are tuning into church, while our building undergoes some renovations for the next few weeks.

Today, as you’ve already gathered from other parts of our service, we are celebrating baptism - not because we have an individual or group of people being baptized but because that the start of the new year, we look to Jesus and his baptism and John the Baptist’s call for us to repentance and start fresh by the gifts of God found by water and the Spirit. At the conclusion, of my message, I will invite those who have been baptized to share in an act of baptismal remembrance, if you want to do that where you are tuning in you might want to have some water handy. For those yet to be baptized I invite you to anticipate your baptism and be joyful and if in today’s message you want to be baptized feel free to contact me directly [rob@genevaumc.org](mailto:rob@genevaumc.org) and we can find a time to make that outward sign of what God is doing inside of you as an act of grace. So let’s jump in today, with prayer.

## **Prayer of Illumination/Praise**

Jesus, Our Redeemer, Our Savior, Our Friend:

There is no where that we can run that would have us escape from your love and your presence. Even in this hour; in this sacred space; our hearts and minds wander from you and what you would have us hear this day. Relentlessly pursue us that we might be present and open to your word for our lives. Amen.

## **Sermon**

I’m really grateful for Disney for finally taking my mental image of John the Baptist and bringing it to life. Matthew tells us that John the Baptist was a kinda out-there prophet. Calling people to repent of their sins out in the wilderness, offering a cleansing of sin through baptism all while dressed in camel’s hair, with unkempt hair and beard, eating a diet of locusts and wild honey (which is probably next year’s fad cleanse diet by the way). Can you imagine a guy who kinda looks like Yax from kids-movie Zootopia inviting you into closer relationship with God, by looking to turn your life around through the repentance of sin, then having this guy dunk you in



the muddy Jordan River? Yeah, I struggle with the image too. Though thousands of people were coming to receive John's baptism. People were finding God through him. Part of John's preaching was the prophecy that One was coming who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit. One whom John himself was not even worthy to carry this One-to-come's shoes.

Our passage today has Jesus arrive on the scene - out in the wilderness - presenting himself to be baptized by John. Now John and Jesus know each other; they are probably cousins. But our Gospels do not make it clear if John knew ahead of time that Jesus, his cousin, was the One he was referring to in his prophecy or if it became clear to John when Jesus arrived on the scene. In either case, John the wildly bold prophetic preacher is suddenly flabbergasted when Jesus wades out into the Jordan River. When Jesus asks to be baptized and John starts to refuse. John in saying "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me" in essence is saying "I'm not worthy to baptize you, Jesus; if anything you, should baptize me." But Jesus responds to John basically saying: "John, trust me; this is what God, my Father wants, let's just do it and see what happens." And so Jesus draws closer to John, preparing to be submerged in the muddy Jordan River, ready to take on a sinner's baptism and ready to come up and receive new way of living in God's name.



I want to pause here for a moment. Something very crucial to the Christian faith is happening in these moments; it requires a little attention. Many Christians believe that Jesus is without sin, so why did Jesus need to be baptized? This question forms the statement for John's resistance to performing Jesus' baptism. Yet, Jesus says his baptism is necessary to fulfill all righteousness. So what is going on here: Well, Matthew is making sure that we know that "Jesus is not the one we (or even the prophets) expected, but Jesus *is* the one we needed. Jesus comes in this passage to fulfill God's plans, not ours. Which means that even the prophets sometimes misunderstand what Jesus is doing. **By Jesus coming before John to be baptized, Jesus comes not in judgement, but in solidarity.** Jesus is showing us that God identifying with God's people, by sharing our penitence, living our life, and ultimately dying our death."<sup>1</sup>

John is right. He's not worthy of being so close to God. He's not worthy of being chosen by God to partake in what God is doing through Jesus. None of us are worthy and yet Jesus insists that what transpires in our gospel is God's will.

Worthiness is a dangerous notion. So often we can think that we either are or are not worthy to be loved by or employed by God. You see our culture ties worth to what we earn or

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<sup>1</sup> NT Wright - Matthew for Everyone

what we have. Our worth is determined by how much we work; our skill, brawn, ability to earn, save, and invest. Culture tells us worth is something *we* do. What is dangerous about understanding our worth in relationship to God in this manner is that we are not worthy. We will never work hard enough, be good enough, to earn God's love. When we think we have earned our worth before God, that's when we've really missed the whole point. At the same time it's thinking of worth and God in this manner that keeps people away from God. Some people aren't as easily self-deceiving and go the other way and think that they will never be worthy of being loved or employed by God and as such feel distant or ostracized and that belief is equally misguided as well. I know the truth of such self-deception because for a long time I was one of these misguided.

You see, I grew up in the church. To loving Christian parents. I was raised with Christian morality. I was taught the biblical narrative of our faith. In the fall of fourth grade, without the direct prompting of kindly church folk, I prayed and asked Jesus to come into my heart and I believe he did so in that prayer. For roughly ten more years, I lived a good-Christian life; I went through confirmation and was baptized when I was 14 and continued to progress along in my faith as most people do at that age.

Then, in my second-year of college, I had a new found spiritual awakening. My prayer life deepened. I started engaging in small-group bible study and found my knowledge and faith expanding. The more I grew and studied the more I believed that if I just resolved my will, I could live a life worthy of what Christ had done for me. With the right hard work and determination, by prayer and the support of others I thought I could go for extended periods without sin. I wanted to live a sin-less or at least a reduced-sin life so that I would be worthy of God's love. After all, I had experienced God's love; I accepted God's love into my heart. I was doing all of the right Christian things. I just needed to keep earning God's love. Every time I'd fall short of what I thought or what I was taught that good Christians do; I'd face the reality that I was not worthy of God's love and I was growing tired of risking losing my worthiness before God - at least that is what I thought (I was even probably taught that somewhere along the way). In a way, even as I grew in my faith, I felt imprisoned to the ebb and flow of my frugal ability to live without sin or simply striving to live a good life.

Then one Sunday morning in August 2002 while at an early morning prayer meeting, I believe I actually heard God speak to me. I don't mean like in the still small-voice, prompting of the Spirit kind of speaking to me. I mean like an actual voice, like Paul heard on the road to Damascus. I don't recall if there was anything in particular that I was praying about that led to what I heard, but I do know I was in a season of trying to earn God's grace by being what I felt was worthy in the eyes of God. The voice, which I recognized as both strange and divine, said **"You are not worthy. You will never be worthy. But because I love you, because of my love for you. I will give you what you need."** That voice spoke right to my soul. It cut through all of my best efforts. It convicted and freed me in one sweeping motion through my whole being. I knew then -and its taking me even longer- to live into the reality God doesn't love me because I'm worthy; I'm not worthy. I can't, nor will I ever, earn God's love. All the good, godly actions and behaviors I was doing are empty before God because I was doing them because I thought I needed to do them to ensure my status in God's good graces. But because of God's voice, the truth of the matter is the only reason I -or any of us- have any standing before God is simply

because God loves me. God loves me not because of my worth; not because of anything I had done or didn't do. **God loves me - God loves all of us- because that's who God is.** God laid claim on my life, calls me God's own beloved child, and that is the only reason I'm worth anything before God.

Sacred worth is all and only about God and NOT about us; which is what we discover in our scripture lesson as Jesus comes up out of the water the heavens open and the Spirit descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove. Then a voice was heard saying **"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."** From this moment, Jesus proceeds to be tested and tried during a period of fasting and prayer in the wilderness.

But that voice, the voice from heaven that lays claim on Jesus with the words: **'You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.'** The voice makes no mention of worth. The voice just makes plain the claim of love that God has on Jesus. Jesus later tells us all to be baptized in his name. Jesus tells us that indeed we are not worthy, but God's claim of love on all people is never about worth; it's about God's redeeming love.

When that dove came down it shows us that God's judgement is achieved not with a warlike or vindictive spirit, but with the making of peace. In fact that dove shows us that judgment itself is being judged and Jesus will take the judgment upon himself and make an end of it. **God's not judging us. In Christ, God is simply trying to get us to accept that we too are God's beloved children, in whom God finds pleasure.**

That's why on the Sunday when we remember the Baptism of Jesus, instead of the sacrament of communion we celebrate a congregational reaffirmation of baptism. To be reminded of and be reclaimed by God's grace. What we do today is not a re-baptism or being baptized again. Because God's claim on us never fades, because God's love has nothing to do with our worthiness, we believe we only need one baptism. It's because when our love fails and we turn away that by God's grace we can reaffirm our baptism, we can reclaim that promise God made to us that we are loved and that we belong to God.

So in a moment we'll use some of the responses on the screen to make that commitment to God again. But let me offer some instructions first for how this remembrance will work:

If you have been baptized at some point in your life - today we remember that baptism, even if it was when you were a baby and you have no memory of it. You gather some water or fill your bathtub - however much you want and you'll be invited to remember your baptism and be thankful.

If you haven't yet been baptized and are not ready to be baptized- this goes for children too- we can anticipate your baptism, those who anticipate their baptism - you also can touch or engage the water with your hands and I invite you to anticipate your baptism with excitement.



If there are any here who have not previously been baptized in any church or community but would like to be baptized today, like I said before reach out to me directly and we can find a time for you to be baptized

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE SERVICE - 50**

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Through the Sacrament of Baptism  
we are initiated into Christ's holy Church.

We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation  
and given new birth through water and the Spirit.

All this is God's gift, offered to us without price.

Through the reaffirmation of our faith  
we renew the covenant declared at our baptism,  
acknowledge what God is doing for us,  
and affirm our commitment to Christ's holy Church.

### **RENUNCIATION OF SIN AND PROFESSION OF FAITH**

Since the earliest times, the vows of the Baptismal Covenant have consisted first of the renunciation of all that is evil and then the profession of faith and loyalty to Christ.

On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,  
reject the evil powers of this world,  
and repent of your sin?

**I do.**

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you  
to resist evil, injustice, and oppression  
in whatever forms they present themselves?

**I do.**

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,  
put your whole trust in his grace,  
and promise to serve him as your Lord,  
in union with the Church which Christ has opened  
to all people?

**I do.**

According to the grace given to you,  
will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church  
and serve as Christ's representatives in the world?

**I will.**

*Let us join together in professing the Christian faith  
as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.*

Do you believe in God the Father?

**I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.**

Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

**I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and will come again to judge the living and the dead.**

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic\* church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.**

#### THANKSGIVING OVER THE WATER

Let us pray.

Eternal Father:

When nothing existed but chaos,  
you swept across the dark waters  
and brought forth light.  
In the days of Noah  
you saved those on the ark through water.  
After the flood you set in the clouds a  
rainbow.  
When you saw your people as slaves in  
Egypt,  
you led them to freedom through the sea.  
Their children you brought through the  
Jordan  
to the land which you promised.  
In the fullness of time you sent Jesus,  
nurtured in the water of a womb.  
He was baptized by John and anointed by  
your Spirit.

He called his disciples  
to share in the baptism of his death and  
resurrection  
and to make disciples of all nations.  
Pour out your Holy Spirit,  
and by this gift of water call to our  
remembrance  
the grace declared to us in our baptism.  
For you have washed away our sins,  
and you clothe us with righteousness  
throughout our lives,  
that dying and rising with Christ  
we may share in his final victory. Amen.

***You may now touch the water to remember  
or anticipate your baptism with thanksgiving  
and joy.***