

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (NRSV)

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Every year right after Christmas, the church celebrates the Baptism of Jesus. And every year, I come across an article or a question from one of the confirmands or a thoughtful grown-up, asking why Jesus needed to be baptized. And over the last few years, I've given all of the approved answers developed by thoughtful theologians –that he didn't want anything to separate him from God's people, that Jesus was inaugurating the church and intended to be an example for his people. Most of the answers seem to imply that Jesus didn't really need to be baptized. After all, he had no sin that needed to be washed away. God had already named him and claimed him before he was born – in John's view, before the world was created.

But something happened last Sunday that had me thinking a new way about the question of why Jesus was baptized. Here's what happened.

Between the services, we had the Christmas pageant, and it was wonderful. The kids were well-behaved and knew their lines and the songs and the costumes were great.

But my attention kept being drawn back to the twins, Timothy and Isabel Card. The rope that was Timothy's belt kept falling off and Isabel was wrapping it around him and kind of hog-tying him up there, but they both had these wonderful smiles and they'd wave at their parents and the congregation and you just knew that they were having just a great time. And I knew that in addition to their parents loving them and the audience loving them, that God just loved them, too. How could he not?

And every time I thought about the baptism of Christ this week, my thoughts came back to the twins, and I wondered why. And I realized that maybe we were paying attention to the wrong thing – the important thing was not that Jesus needed to be baptized, to be claimed and named and washed and forgiven, but that God was so delighted with Jesus that God just couldn't hold back from blessing him, and that the baptism tells us more about what God wants to give us than what we need.

Remember that at the time of Jesus' baptism, he hadn't yet begun his public ministry. Oh, he was a promising young man – Luke tells us about how Jesus amazed the teachers in the Temple with his understanding. But it wasn't so much what he had done as *who he was* that pleased God so much. Luke doesn't attend to the baptism very much at all – he doesn't say who does it, or record any conversation between John and Jesus, as Matthew does. It seems like Luke is more interested in what follows, when God sends a dove down to Jesus and says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (NLT: "You are my dearly loved son and you bring me great joy.") It is as if God just can't hold back he is so happy with Jesus, so thrilled with him and loves him so much.

It is as if God's feeling about Jesus at the moment of his baptism was like all of our feelings about Isabel and Timothy, and how lovely and delightful and perfect they were. Now I know they aren't perfect, but there was just that moment when the twins looked at the audience and everything that was wrong in the world, all the hunger and cruelty and hatred and fighting just receded into the background a little bit and what stood out was these two lovely kids.

Sometimes in our thinking about theology and doctrine and requirements we try to put walls around God, to tell God what God should do or must do or cannot do, but God just pays no attention to any of that stuff. God looks at Jesus or at Timothy and Isabel and God just loves them and blesses them. And whatever else we may think is required or necessary or impossible just goes right out the window.

At those moments, I'd trade all my seminary classes and degrees and sophistication for that absolute feeling of wonder and joy that I saw in the twins' eyes. They really knew, in their bones what we only talk about and hope and pray for, and that is not just God's love but God's absolute delight, sheer bubbling-over rejoicing in them, in these children who are at that moment the very best that creation has to offer.

When we lose that sense of God's joy, God's complete involvement in and absolute commitment to Creation, God's boundless love for our children and our parents and *for us*, then we've lost something very important, something without which nothing else makes any sense at all.

And this is not something new about God in the New Testament. Look at the reading from Isaiah – “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine ... you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you” (NLT: “Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are

mine ... you are precious to me. You are honored, and I love you.) says the fierce God of the Old Testament.

I wonder why it is that we have trouble with the idea that God just absolutely loves us, just as we are. Oh yeah, we're not perfect, God knows that, and we know it, too. And God hopes for us, hopes we'll get our acts together a little better.

Jesus will certainly become a son God can be proud of. He will stand with the poor and the marginalized. He will heal the sick and the suffering. He will tell God's people about God's kingdom and God's love, even if it costs him his life. But that is all in the future at this point – right now, God loves him just because, actually for no reason at all, any more than we needed a reason to love Timothy and Isabel, or our own children at those rare moments when we let our guard down, when they're sleeping or studying or playing and we're just overcome with love for them. And that doesn't mean we're not parents, that we don't have standards and expectations and rules and all of that, no not at all. But, when we let our guard down and just run a hand through that messy hair or touch that cheek, we can admit that we just love them.

And maybe that's what God is doing in the Gospel lesson today. Not thinking about what Jesus needs, that he needs to be empowered in his ministry or that the people need to understand Jesus' solidarity with them. Not thinking that this act of baptizing Jesus will probably mess up systematic theology and theologians for at least two thousand years and won't that be great? Maybe not thinking of anything at all, except that he loves this perfect child so much that he just has to say so, the way any parent would. The way we did with Timothy and Isabel.

Theology, after all, is the study of God. And sometimes that study is extraordinarily complex, requiring that we consider three persons but only one essence, or how God might live outside of ordinary time and space. But sometimes theology can also be simple

– “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”
(NLT: “You are my dearly loved son and you bring me great joy.”).

Is it possible to reconnect with those feelings of God’s sheer delight in his children and in creation, to reconnect with God’s joy in the people he has created and claimed and loves so dearly. If we can do that, we can begin to understand that we have a God who is less about requirements and more about rejoicing, less about doctrine and more about delight, less about judging and more about joy in his presence.

Amen.