

Matthew 3:13-17  
Seeing Clearly  
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell  
1-8-17

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Good morning, my friends. It is very good to be back with you. Like each of you I know that a little time away, an opportunity to recharge our batteries and step back from the hustle of everyday life is very good. This last week for us was very good. We had a chance to rest, to sleep, to do a little swimming, spend time with family, and just enjoy some time to simply rest. I hope that you got a little of that in the days following Christmas, as well.

But like all vacations, there came a point a few days ago, when I looked at Amy and said, “I’m ready to be back home.” Our life, our family, our home—for this season of our ministry—is here with you and it is good to be home.

Now one of the things we had a chance to do, for which I am very grateful, is to take our children for a day to this place (picture of Cinderella’s castle). I was so proud of my family and especially my kids because they relished and enjoyed and basked in the warm glow of Disneyworld in just the way I thought they would. As the pack mule for the day, I was the guy schlepping around fruit snacks, goldfish, cameras, sunblock, sunglasses, sunhats, and Capri Suns, but Amy and the kids gave me the most profound gift of all, seeing their faces light up when they saw each new sight, when they met Mickey and Minnie, Ariel and Aurora, Goofy and Donald, and all the others.

The other great gift they gave Amy and me...a coma-like sleep that night after we shut the place down.

Now as great as it is to escape into the wonder of Walt Disney’s powerful and world changing imagination, the thing I saw in great abundance that day were costumes, masks, wigs. People who—albeit for the good and beautiful reason of making children like mine beam with joy—made themselves up, put on a mask, pulled on a costume or a wig, and became someone else.

So this morning, I want to ask you this simple question: who are you? Do you know what your identity is? It’s remarkable how much of our society is consumed with the questions surrounding our identity. What is your national, racial, ethnic, religious, gender, socio-economic identity? What part does your work play in your identity? Does your mood depend on how things are going at the office, in the market, or how your team is playing? Upper, middle, lower class? Lower-upper, middle-upper, upper lower class?

This brings us to our story for this morning. Today, we meet Jesus for the first time in his adult life and he is going down to a river. You see, down at the Jordan River was Jesus’ cousin, a guy named John, and he was preaching. And the message he spoke in emphatic terms was “repent, turn around, get your life right because God is coming.” Your basic “turn or burn” message.

And what he was challenging people to consider is this: do you know who you are? Do your actions indicate that you are ready to meet the Messiah when he comes? Because when he comes, he is going to rain down fire from heaven. He has a winnowing fork which he will use to separate the

wheat from the chaff. And the chaff will be burned. So you had better choose to repent and clean up your life.

Startling message, right? It's the kind of message we might expect to hear from someone who's a little unhinged standing on a soapbox yelling at people as they pass on the street. Well, John's a little crazy, too. It says that he wore camel hair clothing, not the priestly robes like those in the temple. It says he ate locusts and honey and lived in the wilderness. We might be tempted to brush him aside as a fringe religious lunatic. But the Bible says that John was the last in the line of Old Testament prophets whose role was to challenge people by asking them very directly: are you standing on firm ground with God, or are you someplace sinking down away from him? Who are you?

John's job was to call the people back to obedience and fidelity to God's, and the way he did it was by calling them, as Matthew says in verse 11, to repentance, to a strict adherence to God's law, the Torah. And he did it, and it worked. Drove of people came to follow John, they came to hear what one preacher calls the "Bad Dog" message. The message that says you've been a bad boy or girl and you better get yourself right with God, and the way you get your act together is by being better Jew.

Why do the judgmental "bad-dog" churches always seem to have a crowd? Is it because we sit there and think "yep, I'm glad so-an-so is here, because they really need to hear this message"? I don't know. Maybe we're drawn to it because we think the judgmental critical message is what we know best—and so it must be what we deserve.

I remember in Christian's first year of preschool him coming home with a report card that said he needed improvement in a few areas. One of which was tying his own shoes. We hadn't taught him to tie his shoes. How would he be expected to pass the tying his own shoes portion of the exam? And immediately upon seeing them fell into despondency thinking that something wasn't right, that we had failed him somehow, that his teachers were already giving him a label that he would carry with him—4 year old who cannot yet tie his own shoes—how will he ever get into Princeton or Stanford?

John was inviting people to be baptized, but it was a different kind of baptism (to be clear, his is not a Christian baptism). His was the baptism of wiping the slate clean so that you can do better next time. Make better choices, try harder at work or on your exams, stop losing your temper with your family, be a better Christian, keep the grass mowed and the flower beds in impeccable shape: try, try, try, do, do, do, work, work, work.

This is what it looks like, am I right? Many of us still fall into this camp, whether we realize it or not. We may not discipline ourselves like this, but when things go sideways, we hear this refrain...I know I do. We come to the river to see John and we hear his message in our minds again and again, "not good enough." And we say, "Amen. Don't I know it, John?"

Our identity is wrapped up in our ability to manufacture and create it on our own, under our own steam.

Then one day, Jesus of Nazareth, John's younger cousin steps to the bank. This was the Son of God, the one who is without sin, the one John had been warning his followers would come soon. Here he was, and fire and brimstone didn't follow him, flaming swords didn't accompany him, at least not in

the sense they thought they would. He didn't bring his winnowing fork. He stepped into the river and said, "John, I must be baptized by you."

And John looks at him and says, "Boss you got it all wrong, I can't baptize you. You are the standard of righteousness we're all trying to meet." They argued for a bit and guess who won the argument? Jesus.

Finally, Jesus, the one who was without sin, submitted to John's baptism of repentance—needless though it was—for one striking reason: to identify with us in our humanity. Every time we say to ourselves "I'm finally going to try and get things right," or "I'm finally going to make the right choice." This was Jesus stating once again, like he did in the manger, that I am coming to be fully with them, body and all, choices and all, brokenness and all. This was what it meant for him to be fully human, in-carnate (in the flesh), one with us.

Why would Jesus, God's Son, do such a thing? Because, as he said, it was fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. We are not saved by finally getting it right. We are made right by the one who finds us and saves us.

Then in the next verses it says that the heavens were torn open and the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove, and the voice of God said, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased." Do you notice that the voice doesn't give the designation at the manger, it doesn't happen when the kings arrive, it doesn't happen at the day of his circumcision when Simeon says "let your servant depart now in peace." The designation of beloved happens after Jesus submits to John's baptism. Why?

It came then because it was there that Jesus entered into our desperation to make things right. It entered there because our efforts to become right with God are so feverish sometimes that we literally have to hear the voice from heaven remind you that you too are his beloved.

Amy was reminding me of a story yesterday of a day when I had already left for work and she and the kids had just returned from the Y, laundry was on the floor, dishes were in the sink from the night before, the kids were running wild around the house with food all over their faces, and she hears a knock on the door. Parents, you know how our hearts drop when you realize that a pop-over is about to happen at just the wrong time.

It was her dad, and as he walked in, Amy said, "Dad, I am so sorry the place looks like this, I don't know how it could get so out of hand, I'm so sorry." And he said, "Honey, you are my daughter. I love you, that's who you are. All of this other stuff is just life. But you are who I'm here to see."

You are a beloved daughter or son of God. That is the basis of your identity. You're not beloved because you finally figured out how to get everything right. You're loved because you belong to God. That is what you have always been. In Jesus' baptism, God found you.

Christian baptism is not just about washing your sins away so that you can get a second chance at getting your identity right. Instead, our theology reminds us that Jesus identified with us and our judgment in his baptism, so that we are then identified with him his righteousness, his wholeness, his grace in our baptism. As the early church father Athanasius said, "He became what we are, so that

we might become what he is.” On your bulletin today, I included a quote from St. John Chrysostom that reads, “The heavens were opened to inform thee at thy baptism that this will be done.”

Whether you are an infant or an adult when you enter the waters of baptism, the reminder is the same: life is not about what we choose to make of it; rather it’s about what God has chosen to say over our lives—namely, you are loved, you are chosen, you are beloved, because you’re with me.

So when you feel the pressure to shape up, get right, figure things out, get better, remember your baptism. When you feel the pressure of that New Year’s resolution, remember your baptism. When things don’t turn out the way you hope, remember your baptism. When you finally decide to give up trying to live the life you think everyone else expects you to live, remember your baptism. Because the truth is, none of those other things can fix you anyway.

Your baptism tells you, you’re already loved, you’re already chosen. That’s an identity you can’t really improve upon. Amen.