Towson Presbyterian Church

June 12, 2022

Rev. Joel Strom

Colossians 3:1-4 and Mark 1:9-11

*“Remember Your Baptism, Your True Self”*

**Colossians 3:1-4**

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

**Mark 1:9-11**

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ *Holy Wisdom, Holy Word*…**Thanks be to God.**

Well, TPC, I have good news to share, we have a baptism today! Over the last two years it was just about impossible to have a baptism, and we finally had our first this past January when we baptized Will Gisewite, and today we bring up to the font Alexander Williams, and next week we have two more - we’ll baptize Oliver Brown and Alice Krueger. Baptisms are always special and sacred, and when we have a baptism each of us are invited to remember our own baptism.

My baptism was at the church I grew up in, the First Church of Christ in Unionville, CT. It’s a Congregational church that’s within the United Church of Christ denomination, and in July of 1976, on a Sunday where temperatures I’m told hit the mid-90s, I was baptized in our non-airconditioned sanctuary. My mom tells me the outfit I wore that day made me sweat like crazy, and with the temperatures so high I was not a happy camper. Lots of crying throughout that baptism.

Since I was 11 months old that day, I do not remember a single thing from that experience, only the few stories that have been shared with me. And yet, today, as Alexander is baptized, we are invited to *remember* our own baptisms. Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA, primarily baptizes infants, though we are all for adult baptisms, and we have one coming up later this summer, which I’m very excited about. And the history of when the church transitioned from only adult baptisms to adult *and* infant baptisms is naturally a long story, and it’s a multi-pronged answer, and it’s not for today. I remember in my 20s consciously struggling with the idea of infant baptisms, because the child had no say in what was happening. They couldn’t decide – it was the parents who were making the decision – and at that time I was adamant that a person should make a decision to be baptized. I mean, look at Jesus. He was an adult – right around 30 years old - when he was baptized. He decided to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. It was his personal decision. He made the choice for himself.

My turning point, my change in how I understood infant baptism, happened in seminary one day when a professor pointed out to me the depth of God’s love that we find in infant baptism, when the one who is being baptized has no idea or understanding of what is happening. And even further, the child hasn’t even *begun* to conceptualize the idea of God. Who or what is God has not even made it into their brains…and yet…we take them to the font and pour water over their head and tell them that in that very moment…they are beloved in God’s eyes.

Before that infant knew anything at all about God, before God was even an idea to them, their baptism pointed to God, who looked at the core of who they were, and said *You have been, and you will always will be, beloved in My eyes*. When we baptize infants, we get to name the reality of who this child is in Jesus Christ – who they were yesterday, who they are today, and who they will be tomorrow – completely loved, completely accepted, completely whole. We get to name their Original Blessing, that they are loved simply because *they are*.

In Jesus’s baptism, he models for us our own baptisms…as he rises out of the water, he hears these words…*you are beloved in my eyes…in you I am well-pleased…* and in our baptisms those same words are said over us. Maybe the words we hear from God in our baptisms could be said like this: *in you God delights…in you God finds deep joy*. In our baptisms, God looks at us and says unequivocally and unabashedly says, YES!

Our baptism answers the question, *Who am I?*, at the deepest possible level. And it’s that question, *Who am I?*, that we start asking early on in our life, which is natural, and needed, and we probably keep on asking it for the rest of our lives. *Who am I? And why am I here? Why am I here on this earth? And do I belong? Do I really, really belong?* I’ve been asking those questions, really since I was a teenager, and I’m still asking them.

It's why I’ve come to like the Enneagram so much. I’ve found it to be very helpful in slowly chipping away at the question, *Who am I?* This past Thursday we offered another *Intro to the Enneagram* class here at TPC, and the Enneagram is a study of nine basic types of people. It explains why we behave and often act the way we do, what are some of our basic motivations in life, and it offers insight and direction for personal growth. While it’s similar to a personality typing system like Myers-Briggs, what’s unique about the Enneagram is while it points out all of the strengths and gifts we each possess, it simultaneously describes all the places within us that still need to grow and become.

But it can start us down the path of discovering that deeper self in each of us, which can ultimately lead us to what our baptisms have to say about us.

What we hear said to us in our baptisms is what many have called our True Self. This term, the True Self, was coined first by Thomas Merton, who was a Trappist Monk within the Catholic tradition. Merton was a writer, a theologian, a poet, a social activist, and many called him a mystic. He tragically died in the late 1960s, and he described the True Self in each of us as the inherent dignity that we all possess, our divine DNA.

To Merton, and others, our True Self is not our best self, or our most polished or put-together self, or our most moral self. Instead, it’s that place where we know that all we need to do is simply accept that we have been accepted. The True Self in each of us knows there is nothing that needs to be earned and nothing that needs to be proven. The True Self has nothing at all to do with perfection but everything to do with knowing who we are in God. The True Self, just like our baptisms, tells us that we belong, fully and completely.

Listen to Richard Rohr, in his book *Immortal Diamond*, describe it:

I promise you that the discovery of your True Self will feel like a thousand pounds of weight have fallen from your back. You will no longer have to build, protect, or promote an idealized self-image. Living in the True Self is quite simply a much happier existence, even though we never live there a full 24 hours a day. But you have it as a place to always go back to. You have discovered the alternative of your False Self.[[1]](#footnote-1)

If there is a True Self – what we hear told to is in our baptism – then there is also a False Self, another part of us that tries to answer the question, *Who am I?* Now let me be clear, our False Self is not when we are at our worst, or our sinful self. It’s not a part of us that God dislikes. It just simply doesn’t go far enough in answering the question, *Who am I?* It answers that question but it doesn’t get to the depth of the True Self, which we hear in our baptisms. And the False Self is needed and necessary, too. It helps us to begin forming our identity, and answering the question, *Who am I?*, which we need to do. It’s all a healthy part of identity formation.

The False Self, or some also call it the *small* self, can be our job, which tells us who we are and helps form our identity; it can be the amount of education we’ve received; it can be our body image and the kind of clothes we wear; it can be the money we have; and it can absolutely be our success and achievements. All of these can be good and helpful, but they can also lead us to try and compete and earn our way to answering that question, ***Who am I?*** Their good but only to a certain point. They can only get us so far in life.

When I look at myself and if these characteristics of the False of small self, have answered the question *Who am I?* in my life, previously, and today, let’s take an inventory:

Body image – check

Job – big check

Education – check

Clothes – big check

Money – check

Car – nah…I’m not a big car guy

Success – big check

All of these are needed and necessary for answering the question, *Who am I?* but they just don’t go far enough.

*(During the service it’s here where we displayed two pictures of me during my college years)*

I want to show you two more pictures. Now to preface them, I don’t show these pictures to too many people, so consider yourself lucky…or after you see them, maybe not. Back in the college days I grew my hair past my shoulders**.** Now, let me be clear, I consider this the glory days for my hair and me. I loved these two years when I had long hair. It was common at the time for a lot of people my age to grow it out and most of my close friends had long hair at the time.

It was just a fun couple years of my life for me, and it helped me answer at the time the question, *Who am I?* It was a way for me to express myself, and belong, and try and be authentic. It was good, and needed, especially for me in those late teens, early 20s years when it’s natural to try on different looks and new roles. Today I am proud to be a pastor, and proud of my education and the successes I’ve experienced. It’s just that in answering the question, *Who am I?*, they don’t go far enough, and they don’t get to the depth of what our baptisms tell us about who we are, to who we truly are, to what the writer of our first reading from Colossians says, that our True Self is *hidden* with Christ in God.

Today as we baptize, we are invited to remember *our* baptisms, to remember who we are in Jesus Christ. To remember who God says we are when could not even begin to wrap our heads around the idea of God. And I find solace in how Richard Rohr described the True Self when he said, “*we can’t live there a full 24 hours a day… but we have it as a place to always go back to.”*

I sure don’t live there a full 24 hours a day, but I can see it, I can taste it, and I think you can too.

That you are here this morning, or with us virtually, tells me you’ve already tasted it, or gotten a glimpse of it, or are yearning for it.

TPC, we have a baptism today, so let’s remember our baptisms.

Thanks be to God.

1. Rohr, Richard. *Immortal Diamond* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013) p. 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)