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## “The Scandalous Baptism of Jesus.”

It might surprise you to learn that, for Christians in the early church, the stories of the baptism of Jesus were something of a scandal. And, in retrospect, it's easy to understand why.

Because, according to scripture (*e.g.*, Matthew 3:11) the baptism offered by John the Baptist, was intended to be a sign that a person had repented of their sins. But scripture also informs us (*e.g.*, 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:22) that Jesus lived a sinless life. So, why was Jesus baptized? A lot of answers have been offered over the years, but none of them have really stood the test of time. So, yeah, it's easy to understand why our gospel reading might have presented those early Christians with something of a conundrum.

But what if they all — and, by extension, we all — have gotten this story all wrong? And what I mean is, rather than being shocked and dismayed because Jesus was baptized like us, maybe we should be shocked and dismayed by the fact that we get to be baptized like Jesus was! Maybe that's how we need to begin approaching our interpretation of this story.

You see, what I think has been going on, is that we've been confused about the connection between baptism and forgiveness. And I'd like to explore that for a few moments.

So, first of all, I'd like to begin by stipulating that, yes, there is a connection between baptism and the forgiveness of our sins. But baptism is also linked — and, perhaps, more importantly — it's linked to our relationship with God. In part, it's about (as someone once described it) it's about being “named and claimed” as the children of God. However, the mistake I think we too often make is that we assume that God forgives us so that we can be “named and claimed”; so that we can be baptized; so that we can be his children.

But I think we've gotten that backward. I don't think God forgives us in order to make us his children. I think God forgives us because *we already are his children*. By virtue of our birth, we are God's children. And forgiveness is a *result* of God's love for us, and not a *condition* of that love.

I can remember, as a young priest, baptizing both of our daughters. It was something that I wanted to do in the worst way. And not because I wanted to be able, finally, to love and forgive

them. But because I *already* loved and forgave them. And because I wanted them to share with me in a life that was marked by the knowledge and assurance of God's unconditional love and assurance. And having just spent seventeen days with our grandson, Max, I am thrilled that our daughter and son-in-law have invited me to officiate at his baptism, a month from now. Because for me, baptism is a sign and reminder that God has always loved and accepted us. And that God always forgives us.

And so, for a long time, Christians have been confused about the connection between baptism and forgiveness. But that's just one of the things we've been confused about over the years.

Another thing we often get confused about is the connection between the laws of God and our being the people of God. That is, people often fall into the trap of thinking that, if we can follow the *laws* of God, then we can become the *people* of God. In other words, our *obedience* to the laws of God is a mechanism that enables us to become the *children* of God. But that's just plain wrong! I mean, a quick reading of Exodus 19 and 20, clearly shows that the people of Israel were *already* in a covenant relationship with God *before* God gave them his laws. The laws and commandments were God's gift to his people — to his children —

to help them live lives that were productive, and satisfying, and fulfilling.

And yet another thing we often get confused about is the connection between the Cross and our forgiveness. For the last thousand years or so, the main idea being espoused was something known as the Substitutionary Theory of Atonement, and it works like this: We human beings are sinners. And sinners deserve punishment. But Jesus, who is sinless, and therefore doesn't deserve punishment, nevertheless suffers a punishment in our place on the Cross. Jesus is our substitute. Therefore, Jesus' death on the cross is necessary for God to forgive us. Does that sound familiar?

But there are so many obvious problems to this theory. For example, if the Cross is a necessary condition of people being forgiven, then why does Jesus — and, by extension, God — go around forgiving people left and right throughout his ministry? And all that *before* his death on the Cross!

But also (and this is me editorializing), do we really still believe that God — the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of the universe — is actually unable to forgive unless there is first

violence, and bloodshed, and punishment? I mean, that sounds more like a *human* attribute rather than a divine attribute. But all of this, and more, forces me to conclude that the Cross isn't what makes it possible for God to love and forgive us. Rather, the Cross is something that a God, *who already loves and forgives us*, is willing to undergo. In other words, what actually happened is that God came to us in Jesus, to offer us his love and forgiveness, and we'd rather kill him than admit that we needed his love and forgiveness in the first place.

Alright, let's get back to the baptism of Jesus. So, yes, baptism is about forgiveness. But baptism isn't the *mechanism* by which we receive God's forgiveness. We aren't forgiven in Baptism so that God can finally call us his children. Rather, we are forgiven because we are already God's children.

So, yes, baptism is about forgiveness. But it's also about so much more! It's about love, and identity, and affirmation, and commitment, and so much more. In fact, I'd argue that Baptism is more about all of these other things first, and then, as a by-product and as a gift, it's about forgiveness. That is, in Baptism, God proclaims his great love for us; he "names and claims" us as his beloved children; he gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, and

then, and because of God's great love for us, God also promises to forgive, renew, and restore us at all times.

And, getting back to the very beginning of my sermon, that's why I think that what *ought* to surprise us about the baptism of Jesus, is *not* that Jesus is baptized like we are, but rather that we get to be baptized — and thereby named as God's beloved children — just like Jesus is.

Now, remember, at his baptism, Jesus hears God say those unbelievably important words of love, affirmation, and identity:

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And the incredible, shocking, unexpected, and even scandalous thing is that, in our own baptisms, we hear the same thing: “You are my child. You are my beloved. And with you I am well pleased.” And, thanks be to God, those are words that still have the power to change lives!

Amen.