



REALIZING OUR DIGNITY AS BAPTIZED PEOPLE

Did you ever ask yourself: Why was Jesus baptized? John had been calling people to repentance for their sins. The sign of their repentance was to step forward and be baptized by John in the River Jordan. And here Jesus is coming forward to be baptized by John. Why? What's going on? When John raises the question in Matthew's Gospel as to why Jesus is seeking baptism, Jesus basically tells him to just do it and don't ask questions. So what are the Gospels trying to tell us about today's feast? To help us answer the question we need to remember the first story of creation in Genesis.

There we read that the Spirit of God hovered over the waters and creation came out of chaos. In today's Gospel story by Luke, that same Spirit hovers over Jesus in the form of a dove and the voice of God is heard saying that Jesus is the beloved Son upon whom his favor rests. Is this a story about a new creation? What's happening here?

Saint Luke is telling us that something new is indeed happening. In Jesus a new age is dawning. To use the words of John, Jesus will be introducing a new baptism in the Holy Spirit and in fire. John had been calling people to repentance and using a baptism of water as a symbol of their change of heart. But John seems to know that something more is required. Forgiveness of sin certainly requires repentance, but what really destroys sin? Even repentance isn't enough. We cannot bring about true forgiveness on our own.

So Jesus comes to John to pick up, so to speak, from where John must leave off. Jesus, God made human and living among us, comes in the name of all humanity to celebrate the repentance of John and to accept his baptism as a sign of a change of heart---a change in the heart of all humanity which he will bring about by his life, death and resurrection. As a human being, Jesus does what the others are doing---coming to John to be baptized. But in the intimacy of prayer with God, his Father, the "something more" is revealed to John and the people. The heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus, and the Father declares that Jesus is the beloved Son upon whom his favor rests.

You and I, as disciples of Jesus, are called to follow in Jesus' footprints. While John and the people present at Jesus' baptism most likely did not fully understand what was happening, you and I have the benefit of knowing the rest of the story about Jesus. We know that he fulfilled his role as Messiah by his life, death and resurrection. We are now called to follow the path he trod. We have been baptized; we have been, in St. Paul's terms, buried with Christ and died to sin. Jesus has destroyed sin in us. We have also risen with Christ to new life.

We are the beloved sons and daughters of the Father upon whom his favor rests. Because of Jesus, we stand in a new relationship with God. We are God's adopted sons and daughters in Jesus. Because we are baptized, sin in us has been destroyed. Yes, we still sin. Yes, we are in constant need of repentance. Our new baptismal relationship with the Father in Jesus is still being worked out day by day. But the very possibility of forgiveness of sin is ours because of what Jesus did for us as savior and Messiah. So we might answer our opening question as to why Jesus was baptized like this: Jesus was baptized in order to enter fully into our sinful humanity and our need for repentance so that he could do something about it; namely, destroy sin and death in us.

