

Can You Clean a Bar of Soap?

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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."

There are certain imponderable questions in the world that are really meant to be left unanswered. Rhetorical questions to get you to think. Why do we drive on parkways yet park in driveways? Why does Hawaii have an interstate highway system? Why is there Braille on the drive-thru bank machines?

Perhaps my favorite such question is, "Can you wash a bar of soap?" It's an interesting dilemma. I have seen dirty soap – usually after my Dad came in from tinkering with the engine on the rototiller. What would you use to wash a dirty bar of soap? Liquid soap? If we think about this question logically, the answer is clear. You don't technically wash a bar of soap. You use water to remove the dirty layer, revealing the clean soap underneath. But if we think about this question spiritually, we find ourselves at our Scripture reading this morning. How do you clean something that is itself used for cleaning? And why would you baptize a man who is already God?

I was reading an article last week in which a scholar posed that very question. Why does Jesus need to be baptized anyway? John the Baptist preaches that baptism is about judgment and repentance. Sinners should be baptized so they can be made right with God. So if Jesus really is the holy, sinless Messiah, why does Jesus come forward to be baptized?

The baptism of Jesus is told differently in each of the gospels. In the Gospel of Matthew, John protests, saying that Jesus should baptize him. Jesus has to order John to baptize him. But

here in Luke, Jesus just quietly gets in line with the rest of the crowd. Luke writes, “when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized...” We get a very different mental image with these two versions. In Matthew, Jesus’ baptism is special and set apart. But in Luke, it blends in with the crowd. In other words, for Luke, Jesus is just ‘one of the guys.’ Jesus has chosen to identify himself with the damaged and broken people who needed, and were turning toward, God.

This is Jesus living up to his identity as being fully human. Jesus was born both *from* and *into* a world of sin. Not just individual sins, but a world where systems and governments forced even the most righteous people to participate in sinfulness. To understand systemic sin, consider your income tax. You pay to the government a certain amount based on your income. But you don’t get to dictate how it’s spent. You can’t request that it be put only toward programs for feeding the hungry and housing the homeless. You can’t demand that your dollars not pay for the military. So whatever the government decides to do, you are implicated. And this plays out with corporations, our food supply, and lots of other big systems. You can’t live in the world and avoid systemic sin.

So while we may call Jesus the sinless one, he too was part of corrupt systems. He too was implicated in systemic sin. And by coming forward for baptism, Jesus acknowledges that he can’t avoid it. He demonstrates his humanity in a much deeper way than simply showing solidarity with people. In a strange, sideways sort of way, Jesus is foreshadowing his role as savior. Because if even the Son of God doesn’t live in a moral vacuum, surely each of us is also entangled in the broken world of sin, and we need some outside force to save us.

Of course, just as Jesus is fully human, we recognize that in some paradoxical way, he is also fully divine. After Jesus was baptized, a voice from heaven calls out, “You are my son.”

You can't ask for a more obvious indication of Jesus' divinity than to hear God's own voice call out. This is another place where the gospels vary. Some indicate that the whole crowd heard God's voice. But in Luke, God directs his comments to Jesus. Instead of saying, "*This* is my Son," he says, "*You* are my Son." Subtle? Sure. But I'll bet the difference meant something to Jesus. It's more personal; it's meant to give him a sense of who he is and whose he is. This is a moment for Jesus to strengthen his self-understanding and identity.

Throughout Israel's history, the relationship of 'son' has been important. The Israelites get their start through Isaac, the promised son of God's covenant with Abraham. In Psalm 2, we read that the King of Israel was acclaimed as the son of God. In fact, all of Israel is considered to be God's child. When God tells Jesus, "You are my Son," it's a powerful indication of the connection Jesus has both with God and the Israelites.

Of course, God doesn't just say, "You are my Son." God fully declares, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well-pleased." Even before Jesus has done anything noteworthy or worthwhile God praises him. God affirms that Jesus is precious, that he is unique, that he is loved—not for what he does but for who he is. In this baptism scene, God echoes the divine delight and pleasure that was expressed in the very beginning days of creation. After the creation, God said, "It is good." After the baptism of Jesus, after this total immersion into the human condition, God says, "This is good. This is delightful. This is the Beloved, who brings me great pleasure. This is very, very good."

And you know, that kind of affirmation is something we all need. We all know that teenagers look to their friends and peers for all kinds of support. And no doubt about it, friends have a huge influence on the lives of kids. But even in our digital age, when the generation gap seems to be widening, parents are still the number one influence in our kids' lives. Continuing

research bears this out repeatedly. Biggest influence on a student's spiritual life? Not the pastor. Not youth group. Their parents. Biggest influence on whether to take drugs? Not celebrities. Not their friends. Their parents. We all know how important it is to receive those loving words of support and encouragement from our parents. And if God is our spiritual parent, we need to hear those words from God as well.

The great Christian preacher and author Henri Nouen wrote a sermon about how much God loves us. He wrote:

I would like to speak to you about the spiritual life as the life of the beloved. As a member of a community of people with mental disabilities, I have learned a lot from people with disabilities about what it means to be the beloved. Let me start by telling you that many of the people that I live with hear voices that tell them that they are no good, that they are a problem, that they are a burden, that they are a failure. They hear a voice that keeps saying, "If you want to be loved, you had better prove that you are worth loving. You must show it."

Unfortunately, I think most of us can resonate with Nouen's experience. Not because we spend time with people with disabilities, but because we too hear that voice. I think we all struggle with self-doubt, at least from time-to-time. But probably more often than we'd like to admit. And most of the time, you are your own worst critic. We tend to be harder on ourselves than anyone else would be toward us.

But when we are baptized, we receive these same gifts that Jesus did. We receive the blessing of forgiveness – for that which we have done, that which we have left undone, and for our unavoidable participation in systemic sin. We receive the blessing of identity. We become the children of God. And we receive the blessing of affirmation. We get to hear the voice of God say to us, "You are my beloved child, and I am pleased with you. I love you unconditionally. There is nothing you can do to make me love you less. I have known you since you were in your mother's womb, and I have called you by name. Trust that you are loved."

We have a hard time with that sometimes, don't we? We have a hard time believing that we are loved or loveable. Martin Luther, the great reformer and founder of the Lutheran church, struggled with that, too. When he felt at his lowest, he was known to say aloud, "Martin, remember you are baptized."

I don't know about you, but I don't remember my baptism. I was an infant. But I'm pretty sure that no one present that day heard the voice of God out loud. If that had happened, I think I would've heard that story. And I've never heard God's voice at any of the baptisms I've done. It would be great if we could hear God's voice out loud, but since we don't, we have to be that voice for one another. We need to remind each other, we need to tell each other that we are loved. Because we are changed when we know the almighty God of the universe loves us. Individually, with all our faults and flaws. You are loved, unconditionally and eternally. Remember, you are baptized. You are God's beloved child, with whom he is pleased. Amen and amen.