



Harold "Skip" Masback, III
"A Balm for the 'Type A' Soul"
Focal Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17

Matthew 3:13-17 [NT 3]

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Did you ever wonder why? Did you ever wonder just why God was well pleased? I know this seems impious, but what in the world had Jesus done to earn God's love? What had he accomplished that made God well pleased?

Well, it turns out this really raises three questions: there's the "what" question, the "so what" question, and the "now what" question. The "what" question is the "what does the Bible say" question. And the short answer is "nothing," "absolutely nothing." Jesus hadn't done anything to earn God's love.

Think about it, in every Gospel, the baptism was the very first act in Jesus' ministry. As far as we know, all Jesus had been doing for thirty years was hanging around Nazareth, working as a carpenter with Joseph. No preaching, no healing, no working on behalf of his heavenly father. Jesus hadn't done a blessed thing to earn God's love; he hadn't accomplished anything to make God well pleased. God just pronounced it anyway. *"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

That's the answer to the "what" question. The "so what" question is the "so what difference does it make?" question. What difference does it make that Jesus hadn't done anything to earn God's love. And the answer to the "so what" question is: "that's just the point!" The baptism story is a parable of grace. God's love, God's pleasure, God's blessing on Jesus was a free, unearned gift. The answer to the "so what" question is that's just the way God's love is. That's just the way grace works. That's just the point!

The "now what" question brings the story down to you and to me. "Now what are you and I supposed to do with the answer to the 'so what' question?" What earthly difference does this story make in our lives? And here's the answer to the "now what" question: "now, my friends, you and I are supposed to remember that we, too, have been baptized. God has done the same thing for you and for me that God did for Jesus."

Baptism is the sacred sign and seal that God told **you**, before **you** had done a blessed thing, that **you** are God's beloved child. God is well pleased with you. Was well pleased. Is well pleased. Will always be well pleased. That's just the way grace works. That's just the point.

Charles Crawford, the senior minister at Boston's Old South Church made this point once when he was baptizing a baby boy. In effect he said that the baptism was a three-point sermon acted out. Here's the first point: the parents love their baby whether he deserves it or not and whether he knows it or not. When the baby coos and gurgles and smiles up at his parents from his bath, they love him. When he squalls through the night, spits up on dad's tie, and passes his bronchitis along to mom, they love him. That's the first point: the parents love their baby no matter what.

The second point is that God loves the baby whether the baby knows it or not - whether the baby deserves it or not. God loves the baby before the baby can understand it, before the baby can respond to it, before the baby can do anything about it at all except simply to be. That's the second point, God loves the baby no matter what.

Then, the third point is that God loves everybody in the meeting house the same way: whether we know it or not; whether we deserve it or not. That's the third point: in our baptisms, God said to each and every one of us, "this is my child the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

The answer to the "now what" question is that God loves each and every one of us no matter what. Now what? Now, you and I are supposed to remember our baptisms, and we are supposed to go forth to live our lives gratefully and secure in God's love and acceptance.

Hmmm. How's that going for you? I know some of you are pretty good about remembering your baptism, about living your life from a center of gratitude and security, but am I the only one that struggles with this?

I don't have any excuse for forgetting my baptism; I just do. Heck, since I grew up a Baptist, I was baptized when I was twelve years old. I can literally remember the actual event of my baptism. Mostly, I remember worrying about whether my underpants were going to show through when my gown got wet. I remember the event of my baptism; it's just the grace I tend to forget.

I studied the meaning of baptism at seminary, I teach the meaning of baptism to new parents every month, I've been baptizing children for over nineteen years. But somehow, sometimes, the conscious awareness, the steady assurance of God's acceptance slips clean away.

You know, sometimes, I can baptize a baby on a Sunday morning, and, by the time I turn to writing the sermon for the next week, my stomach is already churning, my molars are already grinding, my jaw is already clenching as if God's love, my worth, my very acceptability as a human being are all hanging on the **exceedingly** unlikely prospect that I will come up with something worth saying on God's behalf.

Call me irrational, call me a “type A” personality, call me neurotic, call me unfaithful, and I will cop to the charge, but I don’t think I’m the only one who struggles with this. Some of us find ourselves with a deeply engrained habit of the heart that our adequacy, our acceptability, our lovability, are always at risk, always dependent on making ourselves acceptable to God and those around us. In short, we act as if we have forgotten our baptism.

The great psychologist Carl Jung concluded that the most difficult of human undertakings is to accept yourself. (Carl Jung, "Psychotherapists or the Clergy" in Psychology and Western Religion at 207-208) Jung wrote, “Anyone who uses modern psychology to look behind the scene not only of his patients' lives but more especially of his own life - and the modern psychotherapist must do this if he is not to be merely an unconscious fraud - will admit that to accept himself in all his wretchedness is the hardest of tasks, and one which it is almost impossible to fulfill. The very thought can make us sweat with fear.”) We act as if we have forgotten our baptism.

Why is this so? I’m not sure I know, but I have a theory I trace back to the very first chapter of Genesis. Genesis 1:27 says that “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them.” God created us to be in the image of God, but that’s quite different from creating us to be the same as God. We are like God, in the image of God, in that our created selves can imagine the infinite; but we are unlike God in that our created selves are bound and limited in time and capacity. We can imagine infinite time, but our allotted time is quite finite. We can imagine infinite capacities, but our actual capacities are quite limited.

So every morning we arise to face a potential conflict. Our self fires up its capacity to imagine the infinite and starts tallying up its to do list. Our self imagines the value of spending more time being a better parent, spouse, friend, worker, leader, volunteer, neighbor, citizen, Christian. And these are each valuable aspirations, it’s just that nobody has time to do everything that can be imagined. The self imagines the value of being smarter, more disciplined, better organized, better read, more loving, more fit. And these are each valuable capacities. It’s just that nobody has the power to develop every capacity that can be imagined.

And here’s the nub of the human dilemma. It turns out that the human heart is a throne built for one. The central spiritual question of every life is: “who is going to sit on that throne?” Place God on the throne and you will hear, “you are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.” Put your self on the throne, and you will hear an all-too-accurate critique of just how far you have fallen short of all the infinite possibilities you dreamed up for yourself.

Put God on the throne, make God the judge of your own life, and you will, of course, still face challenges, responsibilities, uncertainties, anxieties and hard work in life, but you will never feel that your acceptance is at risk in the undertakings. Life won’t be something you do grudgingly to earn acceptance, but rather something you do gratefully because you have already been accepted.

Put your self on the throne, make your self the judge of your own life, and you are condemning yourself to a life spent running on the hamster wheel of insatiability. Like a greyhound racing on the dog track, no matter how hard and fast you run, you will still see the mechanical rabbit of imagined perfection receding before you just out of reach.

Listen, beloved. There is no escaping this dynamic. There is nothing you can do that will ever satisfy your own hungry heart. This point was made heart breakingly clear in the first sermon on our first day at seminary.

The preacher was Professor James Dittes. Professor Dittes had earned his Ph.D. in psychology at age 27, the youngest in Yale history, and turning to a life in ministry and teaching at the divinity school, he had risen to be dean of the faculty.

I will never forget his sermon. Professor Dittes came out of the pulpit and stood just before the first pew, his hands clasped behind his back. In a low, gentle voice he said:

“Your lives have seen a long series of ambiguous twists and turns, but now you have arrived at seminary. You have worked hard and done well, but still there has always been a nagging question of worth, but now you have finally arrived at seminary. You have served worthy causes, but always, always there has been a vague question of whether it all added up to anything, but now you have committed your lives to serving the Lord.

You have been longing, looking forward to this day ever since you received your letter of acceptance, because you were sure that from this day forward you would finally be doing work of infinite value, pleasing to the Lord, and earning you the peace that has eluded you.

If this is your quest, if this is why you are here, then you should brace yourself for disappointment. For, as respected as this institution is, as esteemed our faculty, as worthy our studies, the Lord’s favor cannot be won, the peace you seek cannot be earned. They are received as gifts or they are not received at all.”

Remember your baptism. That’s what we’re called to do. Throw the self, that old usurper, off the throne of your heart and place God back where God belongs, back where God was in Eden . . . before we creatures decided we were the creators and assessors of our own worth.

Except it’s not that easy, is it? It’s not as easy as simply writing down one more New Year’s resolution: “this year for sure, I will remember my baptism.” You see, the self may be only a usurper of the throne, but it is a determined usurper, fortified by long held habits of heart and mind. It slinks away to make room for God in the blinding glare of your epiphanies, but then it sneaks back in to re-crown itself as soon as you are again distracted and fatigued by the demands of daily life.

Even so great a spiritual giant as Martin Luther struggled with this question. On the one hand, Luther was a charter member of the “Type A” Hall of Fame who drove himself mercilessly and anguished over his inadequacies. On the other hand, Luther’s great gift to Christendom was his insistence that our worth before

God is not established by our works but rather by God's grace, sacramentally enacted in our baptisms. When Luther felt himself ground down by the wheels of his own guilt or haunted by condemnation, he would remember his baptism, literally crying out, "I am baptized."

If the walls of your home or office are a little too thin for you to be comfortable with that spiritual practice, then let me leave you with a gentler option based on the insights of the great 17th century devotional writer, Brother Lawrence. Simply set aside a minute each morning to remember your baptism. Reflect on the day ahead and resolve to make a gift to God of that one day. In effect, say, "Ok God, I'm placing this day on your altar. I will certainly have moments today when I do your will, and moments when I fall short. But you must know this, because you made me this way. I will never do any better without your help. All I can **do** is to give this day to you and leave the rest in your hands. All I **pray** for is the grace to remember that I am baptized. Let my actions today be informed by your voice still ringing in my ears, "You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." **Amen.**