

In the name of Jesus; Amen.

Baths are for dirty children, stressed moms, and joint-aching dads. Hand washings are to get rid of the germs and sickness of school, the backyard, and public places so we can go to the table. Swimming and sprinklers give relief from the hot sun. Every time our bodies are put in water, it is baptismal. We are cleaned, comforted, and soothed in our baptism. We are cleansed for table fellowship. We are protected from the sun and scorching heat of the devil, the world, and our flesh. Anytime your body comes into contact with water, remember that in your baptism God does the same thing, but to even more than the body: this is a watery Word for body and soul to life everlasting.

Who is baptism for? Baptism is for sinners. To say that we are baptized children of God is an admission that we have fallen far short of God's standards. To make the sign of the cross is to admit that we have been given the needed cleansing that God freely offers in Baptism. Baptism is given to sinners, to wash away the filth and stench and sickness and leprosy and uncleanness of our sin.

Rightly is John the Baptist confused, then, when Jesus approaches him to be baptized at the Jordan river. Jesus is not the sinner. John is. John knows that Baptism is for sinners. He knows that it is God who baptizes, which is why he says to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you." John knows that the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins only matters for sinners insofar as God is the one doing the cleaning, the forgiving. John knows that the baptism he offers to sinners is rightly one Jesus should give. John the Baptizer needs the baptism of Christ. John is, at least partly, asking Jesus: "Should God baptize God? Does God forgive God?"

Jesus is not baptized because He is a sinner. He is baptized to fulfill all righteousness, to reconcile God and man. For when this Lamb of God goes into the baptismal waters, His white wool soaks up all the sinful muck and film that was left behind in our Baptism. He becomes a black sheep, outcast, barely recognizable from the goats of hell. Jesus' baptism takes our sin and puts it into Christ, so that He might carry it to the cross. His baptism and ours are linked, are inseparable bridges so that the transfer might be complete. He absorbed our sin, that we might have His perfection. He took upon Himself our disobedience, that we might have His loving relationship with the Father.

What is more, Jesus so highly values Baptism that He not only institutes it and commands His disciples to make disciples by it, but He undergoes it Himself. He would impress upon you just how important Baptism is. And He shows you why. What happens at Jesus' Baptism happens at your own. The heavens are opened to you, there is no barrier between you and God, between you and the life to come. You are exorcised, as our baptismal liturgy reminds us, when the devil and his unclean spirits leave you and the Holy Spirit descends upon you and fills your heart. You are branches from the vine that the dove alights upon after the flood waters. And God says to you, "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

These things happen in your Baptism because Jesus' baptism by John is completed by the Father's baptism by fire. Jesus absorbs your sin in John's baptism, but He puts it to death in His baptism by fire when He dies on the cross. There, the heavens are not opened, but dark and heavy. There, the Father's voice does not speak toward the earth, but the cry of Jesus, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" reaches to heaven. There, the Spirit does not descend, but is given up to the church as Jesus breathes His last and gives up the Spirit.

Jesus dies for our sins. He dies the death we deserve. But what the Baptism of Jesus shows us is that is not what God intends for you. He does not intend for you to pay for your sins by death. He has, for our sake, mercifully reserved that for His Son. What a loving God we have! He spared not His beloved Son, His greatest treasure, but gave Him up for you in great love and in the pure and strong desire to save you, to stretch out His hand and bring you to a far better life than anything you could leave behind. Our faith may waver, it may wax and wane, ebb and flow throughout our lives. But our Baptism holds true and never changes. If you wonder how God thinks of you, if you doubt that He loves you, read this Gospel over and over again, for they are words addressed to you! Here, God shows us His heart. He reveals, makes manifest, epiphanies how He is disposed toward you. You are His beloved Son. Whether male or female, young or old, when God looks at you, He looks at you with the love He has for Jesus, not because we are good, but because we Christ saved us. There is no disappointment, no anger, no shame, no jealousy. You are His! His soul delights in you, you are His elect one.

There are two important realities in the Father's one-sentence sermon from above that you need to reflect on and live out. The first important reality is that God is the One who gives us our identity. When Jesus is baptized, the Father proclaims an identity statement: "You are my Son." For our own language in the church, it is better to confess that we are sons of God, not

children of God. Throughout Scripture, God identifies Christians as His son. It is not accurate to say that we are sons and daughters of God. Gender-neutral or feminist pronouns will not do when it comes to God and when it comes to you. It obscures the gospel message of salvation. God calls you sons of God because you occupy, in Christ, the relationship that the Son of God, Jesus, has with the Father. Jesus is not a daughter. To say that there are daughters of God is to confess an identity that does not exist. Jesus is the Son of God. When you are baptized, you are brought into that sonship. As an aside, if that sounds sexist, consider that the church of God is called the bride of Christ. Men and women are part of the church, but it will not do to change the language of Scripture and refer to all men as the groom of Christ and all women as the bride of Christ. That would make Jesus out to be a homosexual or polygamist, both of which Scripture denounces as sinful.

Society today often prides itself on identity. “I identify as a Democrat or Republican, a conservative or progressive”, “I identify as a man trapped in a woman’s body”, “I identify as homosexual or queer.” Identity is a contested topic today. Here is a very counter-cultural position, but one Scripture is clear on: you don’t construct or choose your identity, your identity is given to you. Your foundational identity upon which all others are informed, is your identity as a baptized son of God. In your baptism, God gives you your identity. He is the one who has saved you and gives you His Spirit. He is the One who created you, and He does not make mistakes. He has given male and female bodies to men and women. He created them. That is our identity. This is why we must pray for the repentance of those advocating for transgender medicine and ideas, because it assumes that God messed up and we know better than God. It assumes that God is not a very good Creator. This is also why we must pray for the repentance of those who defend and support any type of sexual expression besides a man and a woman within the bonds of lifelong marriage. God created our bodies and souls, in the ordinary course of this life, to be in committed marital union. Those who are widowed or single are likewise to enjoy the gift of chastity that they have to the glory of God. In much the same way, He has revealed in Scripture the various identities that He gives to different people. These are called vocations: father, mother, son, daughter, boss, employee, neighbor, citizen, Christian, pastor. When we struggle with any of these various identities God has given us, it is because we have lost sight of our baptismal identity and have begun to despise and ignore the Word of our Father. God does not give us identities to burden us or make us sad or frustrated. He gives us identity because He

is our Father and knows what is good for His creation, His sons. If our identity is self-constructed, we will simply reinforce and look like whatever perverse desires and deformed attitudes our sinful nature enjoys. If our identity is God-given, we will flourish and made to be as Jesus is.

The second baptismal reality is that baptism is not a moment. It is not a magic spell that you can forget about and makes you Christian forever and always. When God says that you are His Son, He is inviting, He is acknowledging a relationship that He and you enjoy. Your Sonship is not meant to wear off over time. And your relationship with Him doesn't mean you forget who your Father is. To be a son of God is a way of living, of existing. Sons obey their fathers, listen to their fathers, accept discipline from their fathers, want to converse and model their fathers. So too do you, sons of God that you are, obey the Word of God, listen to it, read, mark, learn, and reflect on it, accept correction from God, pray to your Father who are in heaven, and model the life of God, being perfect and merciful as He is, letting your light so shine before men that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father who is in heaven. Baptism is a way of life. It is, every day, putting to death your sinful nature, your selfish desires, your anger and lust and jealousy, and receiving the cleansing splash of baptismal water so that you may walk in newness of life.

By way of example, consider your brother in the faith: John the Baptist. He tried to prevent Jesus from being baptized by him. But Jesus says, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting to fulfill all righteousness." In Jesus' Baptism, John was asked to serve God in the flesh. Jesus asked John to serve Him. And John does so. What is more, John realizes that he is undeserving of this. He confessed earlier that he is not worthy to stoop down and untie the sandals of Christ. He was not worthy to be a servant of Jesus. But Jesus bids Him serve. Jesus invites John not only to serve Himself, not only to serve God, but also to serve the whole mass of sinful humanity, for Christ fulfills all righteousness.

Would that we had the faith of John! For Jesus gives you ample opportunity to serve Him. "Whatever you have done for the least of these my brothers, you have done to me." God puts before you a chance to serve Him in every Christian He brings to you, here in church or there at home, old or young, pastor or parishioner, member or visitor, family or friend. God puts before you a chance to serve Him in every person you meet, for when Jesus takes on our human life, He joins Himself to everyone. What if you considered every person you met as if you were meeting

Jesus? What if you treated and served every person you met as if they were Christ? That may be difficult to be sure. Sometimes it will be pleasant enough, when you enjoy the fellowship of faithful and mature Christians. But other times God will put before you your bratty child throwing a fit or being disrespectful to you, your spouse who has not loved, honored and respected you as they should, a family member who has been hurtful and dishonest, a fellow Christian who gets angry at you over misunderstandings or petty events, a pastor you may not always be satisfied with, or a friend who talks behind your back and God will say, "Love them like Jesus. Serve them as if they were the mask of God." And what is more, God will ask you to look upon those who are blessings and those who are challenges and say, "I am not deserving to serve those who support me or those who undercut me. I am not deserving to serve those who love me or those who are annoyed by me. I am not deserving to serve my disobedient child, imperfect spouse, immature fellow Christian, unhappy stranger, unbelieving neighbor, or those who think well of me. In each of these Jesus bids me see an opportunity to love Him and care for Him. I am undeserving to serve them. But Jesus bids me do so. For thus it is fitting for righteousness to be offered to those who like or like it not." Jesus' baptism gives John an opportunity and command to serve the Christ. In our baptisms, Jesus gives us the opportunity and command to serve Him in others as sons of God. So dive on in. The water is fine. The baptismal life can be turbulent at times, calm at others. But we are always swimming in the life of God. "And suddenly a voice came from heaven saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'" God always says it best.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; Amen.