

Thank you for the gift of last weekend.

My wife and I were at our son's wedding in San Francisco, where more than my vocational identity as Pastor of this Church, I was able to experience and live my identity as part of my beloved family.

Which is the real point of the Sacrament of Baptism: Our hidden identity is as part of This Beloved Family.

Being "Baptism of the LORD" Sunday, I could explain all the doctrinal controversies about Baptism:

- Whether it was appropriate for John to Baptize the Son of God;
- Why did Jesus need to have his sins washed clean;
- throughout the 1st Century people were baptized nude. Now, that would liven up Worship;
- prior to the Black Plague, only adults were baptized, so where do children go if not baptized;
- that the Catholic Church recognizes 7 Sacraments, and we only 2;
- or that Pope Benedict pronounced "Protestant Baptism is now acceptable in the Catholic Church."

But instead, I hope we can focus on Baptism as experiencing our True Identity as part of a Beloved Family. First, we need to admit that most families at one time or another are pretty dysfunctional!

In the Wedding, our first-born was The BestMan. In a self-deprecating manner during his toast, he described that he had been plagued with receiving all of the Family Identities. Not only was he a LINDSEY that we trace back to the Vikings of the 700s, coming from LIMESY MANOR in Scotland. But also a middle name that had been my Father's Mother's FAMILY NAME, traced back generations to Ennis in County Claire, Ireland. And because we liked the sound of an ancestor's name, he was baptized with that as his CHRISTIAN NAME. Except he noted in his toast that, what people knew of the ancestor he was named after, was he was the family scoundrel, who had been a Civil War Soldier who had wasted the inheritance of his unmarried sisters by investing their money in a bunch of seemingly worthless stocks and bonds. So while we loved the sound of his name and had chosen it carefully, he felt burdened by that identity.

Yet, in redemption, among the stocks that ancestor sold to his sisters had been a large portfolio for a process of putting photographic images on paper. Eastman Kodak stock had paid for my grandmother to go to University; my father to earn a Masters and Doctorate in Education; for my brothers and I to all attend the colleges and Universities of our choice; for my parents to purchase a family home that they used as their retirement property, and in the 1960s for my father to get a Sports car. Regrettably, the fortune was all gone by our generation, let alone our sons'; and yet "the family scoundrel" had like Joseph in the Old Testament, provided for the family's survival in generations to come.

Baptism is revelation of a hidden identity, no one else, perhaps not even the person themselves, KNOW.

In the Novel "The River" Flannery O'Connor tells of a certain day when Babysitter Mrs. Connin took 8 year old boy "Bevel" to be Baptized, because Bevel's parents were physically abusive alcoholics.

Standing in the RIVER, The Preacher asked: "Have you ever been Baptized? And Bevel asked "What's Baptized?" The Preacher said: "If I baptize you, you will be able to go to the Kingdom of Jesus. You will be washed clean in the river of suffering and go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?"

The child thought: "I won't ever have to go back to the Apartment? Then, I will go down the River."

The preacher cautioned "You won't ever be the same. Your life will count for something..." And without warning he tightened his hold on the boy, swinging him upside down, plunging his head in the water, holding him there as the Preacher said the words of Baptism. Then jerked him up out of the water and looking sternly into the dilated eyes of the gasping child, he said "You count now. You did not count before, but now you count." As the little boy spat out muddy water, Mrs. Connin called: "Don't forget his Mama."

The Preacher said "LORD, we pray for somebody in affliction, who isn't here to testify." "Is Mama in pain, in the hospital or near death." The child stared at him wanting to say "Well, she hasn't gotten up yet, she has a hangover!"

There is a common formula in writing, that the character often knows their secret identity but feels they cannot reveal this, they must go through life hidden-in-plain-sight. Clark Kent has alternating urges to reveal who he is or remain incognito, so much in conflict that he regularly takes off and replaces his glasses as a nervous habit.

Is that not reality for most of us: our true self hidden in plain sight, unseen even from those we love?

In 2002 Elizabeth Smart was kidnapped from her bedroom in Salt Lake City. Elizabeth Smart was taken by Brian David Mitchell and his wife hidden for 9 months in the woods. However, with her photo on every telephone pole in town, regularly the two brazenly paraded Elizabeth through her own neighborhood. Everyone, believing Elizabeth to be missing, no one recognized her identity for 9 months.

Think of all the praises, compliments and criticisms we receive, that seem for someone else, not us. Consider when your partner gazes up in your eyes, and you know that they are only staring into a mask. Remember the times when you thought: If only the world knew the truth, they would love you and rejoice and other times when you knew if they really knew your thoughts they would recoil in shock and fear. My favorite has become the Bumpersticker that reads "I wish I were the person my dog thinks I am."

Can we admit that the only ones who truly do "know us" are our demons, our self-doubts, anxieties, weaknesses?

Except that on this day, this Baptism of the LORD, we are called to remember that BAPTISM is not a noun, not an absolute, like being a Redhead or Married or a Home-owner.

BAPTISM is a verb, we are BAPTIZED INTO being claimed and loved.

When Jesus emerges from the chaotic waters of the JORDAN, the Heavens open and he hears the voice of God: **"This is my beloved with whom I am well pleased."**

The Jordan, that River the Israelites crossed to enter into the Promised land.

The Jordan where Elisha told Naaman the Syrian to wash and be cured of Leprosy.

But the verb BAPTISM is not about the water, BAPTISM is realization of our glorious identity.

You are BELOVED, the GLORY of the LORD SHOWS All Around You.

Sometimes all we need is to recognize a different perspective, to have a different light shine upon us, that is why this Sunday falls in Epiphany, to see and witness the GLORY shine all around you, to recognize who we really are.

A new practice has been begun in many churches, of asking people to "Remember Your Baptism" except many of us were baptized before memories were established; for others like the boy in the River Baptism was so traumatic and unsettling that we have little memory.

BAPTISM is for the Community, the Church, this Family, to serve as Witnesses that we were here when you were Baptized. So that we hear the voices that proclaim "YOU ARE GOD'S BELOVED with whom we are well pleased!" You are CLAIMED and You are LOVED!

This morning, we are gifted to also celebrate another Beloved Identity, but this one occurs at a stage in life when we are intentional about what we do. Different from churches where Ordination changes a person's position as being slightly lower than God and over others, Ordination in the Presbyterian Church claims the GLORY of God's Spirit shows on you for all of the Responsibilities you are given.