

Like One of the Guys

January 8, 2012

Mark 1:9-11

When someone says, “Tell me about yourself,” where do you begin? You could say: “I was born in such-and-such a place and grew up there, or somewhere else.” Or maybe you begin with your current career: “I work for so-and-so and have been there for x years.”

Or maybe you would say something like, “I’m currently retired and play a lot of golf.” And, there are a lot of other possible responses.

“Tell me about yourself,” has varied answers, depending on you and your preferences as well as whom you are speaking to.

In the Christian Bible we find four different “tellings” about Jesus. They are not the same because four authors wrote to different audiences and with a variety of purposes. Mark’s account, (which is our reading for this morning) begins (we might say), “without warming up.”

The author quickly connects Jesus to the promises of Isaiah and then goes straight to Jesus’ at 30 years of age and his first public action as Messiah. In so doing, Mark emphasizes a Savior who identifies with his people.

Very often in our men’s group meetings, after our main lesson or topic for the day, we’ll talk about it specifically for a while and then let it lead us into other areas of discussion. We’ve had a lot of really good discussions.

I remember one day in particular we were talking about the Jews and the holocaust, that led to talk about Adolph Eichmann and his Jerusalem trial in 1961 for war crimes.

A man named Yehiel Dinur, who had testified against Eichmann, came face-to-face with him for the first time since being sent to Auschwitz almost 20 years earlier, Dinur began to sob uncontrollably and then fainted.

Was Dinur overcome by hatred, or fear, or simply the horror of the memories of Auschwitz? Mike Wallace asked him that very question on 60 Minutes. Dinur said (and I am quoting in his own words): “I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this. I am...exactly like he.” Mike Wallace then said: “Eichmann is in all of us.”

Chuck Colson, commenting on that episode of 60 Minutes, wrote: “Wallace’s summation of Dinur’s terrible discovery—‘Eichmann is in all of us’—is a horrifying statement; but it indeed captures the central truth about man’s nature.

Because the fact is, sin is in each of us—not just the susceptibility to sin, but sin itself.”

Many of you, I'm sure, remember the TV series Star Trek. In Star Trek, "The Neutral Zone," is the space between the Romulans and the Federation, an area that belongs to neither.

In a similar way, many people assume that we are born into this world neither belonging in heaven or hell, but in the neutral zone between them. We remain there until we choose for either God or the Devil.

We forget sometimes, or maybe choose to overlook, the fact that this is not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that we are all sinners and stand in need of redemption, of reconciliation with God. That, on our own, we fall short of God's glory and are separated from God by our sin.

I think we would all agree, if we stop and think about it, that this is a pretty bleak picture! Yet suddenly, in the fullness of God's time as scripture teaches, someone appears with a new identity.

Jesus is baptized into our nature so that we might be baptized into his. Jesus' baptism identifies him with our sin nature, and this produces a couple of very powerful results.

The first result is that because of Jesus' baptism we need not fear owning our need.

John the Baptizer prepared the way for Jesus by confronting us with our desperate situation—we are separated from God. He had one message, one sermon (as it were)—you are sinners in need of forgiveness.

Some were offended by his preaching; he ended up executed (like militant Muslims do today in Iran and Saudi Arabia and other places if you say something they don't like).

And, of course, people are still offended by this truth: before we make a choice, we are declared "guilty" and damned by God's Holy Law.

We are born sinners; thus, we are sinners not because we sin, but we sin because we are sinners. Some say that's due to what is called "original sin" (and Jim Tewes and I have had some good discussions about that); others say it's just basic human nature. But whatever the reason for it, the Bible calls it a fact

Again, that's pretty grim. How is it possible to respond positively to that? Why would we accept the Biblical description of our condition? Why not believe that we are all basically good, rather than that Eichmann is in all of us?

One reason is that it is true. We ought to believe this because it describes reality, even if it is harsh. You know, Al Gore wants us to accept his passion over Global Warming. He wants us to accept his terrifying scenario because he says it's true, "An Inconvenient Truth." He called it.

We may or may not believe Al Gore, but we certainly should believe the Word of God, and one of the Bible's "Inconvenient Truths" is that we are all sinners.

But apart from merely stating it, the Bible offers an even more compelling reason to own this reality. For those with faith and courage to accept it, God in his kindness and mercy provides a solution.

In the midst of John's sermon on repentance, Jesus appears and insists on being baptized. And we would naturally ask, "Why? Why is Jesus baptized?" We are not told that it is because he has a sin nature which commits him to hell and from which he needed to be saved.

Back a few verses from where I read this morning, in Mark 1.5, the last phrase notes that as people were baptized they were, "confessing their sin." But no such phrase accompanies Jesus' baptism. He has no sin to confess. Hebrews 4.15 points out that even though he was tempted in every way, "he was without sin."

So why was he baptized? A couple of scripture passages make it pretty clear.

Isaiah 53.6: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

2Corinthians 5.21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Jesus was baptized for my sin - and yours.

William Hendriksen: "The demand of Jesus to be baptized by John signified his solemn resolution to take upon himself the guilt of those for whom he was going to die. In a sense, by means of baptism Jesus was fulfilling part of his task of laying down his life for his sheep. Moreover, apart from this voluntary self-surrender, symbolized by his baptism, would not all other baptisms have been meaningless? It was by means of the Savior's sacrifice of himself that the basis was established for the forgiveness of sin, a forgiveness signified and sealed by baptism."

And this leads to the second of the powerful results I spoke of earlier – we need not fear the confession of our sin.

I think we can safely say that Jesus so identifies with our sin that he is baptized for the forgiveness of it!

This should greatly encourage you! When we fear our repentance has been weak, our confessions shallow and our feelings of guilt insincere—we should not look to the value of our weak works, but to the perfection of his!

Jesus has taken your sin and mine; Jesus has confessed your sin and mine; Jesus has repented of our sin; Jesus has been baptized for our forgiveness! My repentance does not fit me for heaven; his does!

That is precisely why it is called, “Good news!” It does sound wondrous beyond possibility, doesn’t it? But lest we fear this too good to be true, note that both God the Father and God the Spirit approve of the work of Jesus.

First, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove. The dove symbolizes purity and peacefulness, both of which are related to Jesus. Purity because it was not for his own sins he was baptized. Peacefulness because his ministry brings peace between God and man.

And if you like looking for and finding symbolism in the Bible, consider this:

In the story of Noah and the flood, a dove appeared to Noah as the ark came out of the water, a sign of God’s promise fulfilled in the deliverance from the flood of God’s wrath. So the dove appears as Jesus comes out of the water as a sign of God’s deliverance.

But this time the dove appears, not with an olive branch in his claws, but—as it were—with Jesus Himself in his grasp as proof of God’s deliverance.

So now the dove does not simply lead out one family to dry land, it leads out all of the families of the elect into the new heavens and new earth!

The Spirit visibly approves of Jesus, saying, “Here is the ark which brings salvation to the world.”

Then, second, the Father verbally affirms his approval of Jesus: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

- “I am pleased that you conform your life to my will though it leads inevitably to the cross.”
- “I am pleased that you identify with fallen humanity, having humbled yourself under their sin.”
- “I am pleased that you are faithful to the promise made to take away the sin of the world.”
- “I am pleased that you will save people from condemnation, redeem them from every lawless deed and purify them to my glory and for good works!”
- “You are My beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

And what does all this mean for us? First, we must acknowledge our need for Savior, not just with words, but internally, with conviction. And this means we have to do away with those rationalizations which vainly imagine that we are not quite as bad as all that.

- “I have my shortcomings, but I tried to be a good parent, and I treated my kids better than I was treated.”
- “I may not be the best husband, but she is a contentious woman.”
- “I may not have been the ideal church member, but I attend pretty regularly and always put something in the plate.”
- “I’m not a saint, but I have never killed anyone, or robbed a bank.”
- “I did not clean up my room like you asked, but no one is perfect.”

Isn't it true that even when we find boldness to admit we are less than perfect, we often still couch our confessions in self-justification? “No, I am not perfect; but I am not really all that bad.” But again, listen to the Word: all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

We keep measuring ourselves against a broken ruler and feel we are close. But the standard remains unbroken. It is not really that we break the law, but the law breaks us.

Then Jesus steps into the water. He who knew no sin is baptized for forgiveness. And that brings us to the second application: You are more loved than you ever dared hope.

The sinner must confess, but we cannot comprehend all our sin, much less confess it. The sinner must repent, but we cannot repent sufficiently for the depth of our sin. Jesus' love repents in our place.

Jesus loves you more than you ever dared hope. What lifts your heart? Is it self-justifications and rationalizations? Such hope is no hope at all, for those excuses cannot measure up to God's law. Why not place your hope for forgiveness in Jesus? His love is greater than you could ever imagine!

In his baptism Jesus identified with our sin. It was the beginning of his work which would culminate in the cross as he pays the penalty for our sin.

By birth we are burdened by sin. By faith we are free in Jesus. Not by water baptism. Baptism doesn't save. Faith alone saves.

Just as in most protestant churches, the baptismal font has a prominent place in our sanctuary. I suspect most of us, if we're honest, may see it here but give it very little thought on a regular basis.

Let me issue a challenge, or maybe more politely, a request. As a regular part of your worship here, take a few moments to view and reflect on the baptismal font.

As you contemplate your own baptism, will you see Jesus baptized and tempted and believe that you are separated from God by sin, and at the same time, believe that you are more loved than you ever dared hope? Will you believe?