

Imagine this scene with me. It's a Sunday morning worship service; the front pews are filled with guests. Near the conclusion of the first song, four adults stand up and come forward, one of them holding a baby. The pastor reads from the hymnal and then motions for the adults to bring the baby close to a special bowl of water. After speaking some more words together with the congregation, the pastor reaches into the bowl and pours water on the child three times as he says the name of God: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. After a few prayers and a final blessing, the adults, looking somewhat relieved, take the baby back to their place in the pew.

Let me ask you a question. In that scenario, what took place?

Some might say, "nothing much." Some might say, "it was a rite of passage not unlike rituals in other cultures." Some might say, "it was something we did to get Grandma off our backs." Some might say, "this symbolizes your sins being washed away." Some others might say, "I'm not sure what happened, but the baby sure was cute."

Now, let me tell you what the Bible says about what took place. Saint Paul writes that a person who is baptized is united with Jesus Christ in a death like his and is united with Jesus in a resurrection like his. So that baby held above the baptismal font has been connected to the crucifixion of Christ and has risen with Jesus' resurrection. Everything that Jesus did—everything that Jesus is—has been poured onto that little one and the same is true for anyone who has been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. In baptism, you die and live again with Jesus. That's not just a metaphor. That's reality for the Christian. What does that mean? Listen to Paul:

"Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again...so you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

How might life be different if you remembered (and not just remembered but seized upon and relied upon) the value of your baptism every single day? How might the way you look at yourself be different if you took the time to recall that God chose you and adopted you in baptism? I'm convinced that if we would make it a habit to reflect on what God has done for us in baptism, our whole outlook on life could be remade. But the truth is that much of the time our outlook on life is not shaped by this identity. We just don't dwell on the fact that we're baptized people.

Now, you may have no memory of the event because you were an infant at the time. Fair enough. I fall into that category. But our neglect of baptism's blessings probably has more to do with human nature than memory. What I mean is this: baptism is an offense to all man-made religion. The biblical practice of baptism is offensive to all of mankind's homemade, homegrown attempts to get to God. Why? Because God is the one doing the action. Part of the problem I naturally have with baptism is that I didn't DO anything—it just happened TO me. And the

sinner in me doesn't like the sound of that at all. The sinner in me wants the credit for everything—including my eternal destiny. And that's what so many people who live right next door to you believe—that there is no doubt that they will go to heaven when they die because they've been a good person. And along comes baptism, a practice founded on the Biblical teaching that human beings are dead in sin unless God intervenes—a practice founded on the Biblical teaching that you don't have it in you to climb up the ladder to God, so He climbs down the ladder to you—and there's something about that truth that human pride just hates. It is so easy for something even like Christian faith to be about ME and how I'm doing and what I'm feeling and how hard I'm working. Returning to the Bible's description of baptism is like pushing the reset button and starting over from the beginning. Baptism boils down to this: the work of saving you, ultimately from hell, is God's work alone. The work of building a bridge from earth to heaven is the work of Jesus alone. The delivery system by which you receive the gifts that only Jesus could purchase is baptism.

And so in today's Gospel we are presented with a curious sight: there's Jesus going down into the water to get baptized. I say it's curious because Jesus did not need baptism to be forgiven. We needed Jesus to be baptized, so that he would be "the first one in the water." Jesus was wading into the water of our sin. He got covered with our dirt. In the Jordan River he began his work of doing things he didn't have to do for people who couldn't do them. Part of the baptismal bond you and I have with Jesus is this amazing exchange: Jesus gets our sin, and we get his perfection. Jesus gets our punishment, and we get the rewards that he earned. Now that does not seem "fair," but that is the Gospel, and thank God that it's the truth.

The baptismal connection that you have with Jesus is much like the umbilical cord that connects a mother and child in the womb. Of course, we know that a mother supplies nutrients and oxygen to her child through that cord in a continuous flow, things that keep the child alive and growing. What you may not think of is that the child sends something back through the cord as well. The baby sends back poisonous wastes, and the mother eliminates them for her child. Baptism is that connecting cord between Jesus and you. Through God's extraordinary baptismal connection, all the waste of your sin flows continuously to Jesus and is removed forever by his shed blood—He's absorbed all your poison into his body. In return, Jesus' life-giving strength and perfection flow continuously to you. His life is always being renewed in you! And since you are united with Jesus this way, you're with him in the water as the Father says: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." The words apply to Jesus, and they apply to you, too. You are God's beloved child. He is well pleased with you. Consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Live in your Baptism!