

January 7, 2018

Mark 1:9-11; Romans 6:1-11

“Our New Identity”

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Avenue
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Celebrity Worship Syndrome is an obsessive addictive disorder in which a person becomes absorbed with a celebrity in an attempt to establish their own identity and sense of fulfillment. Martin Scorsese described how he sees the fan's out-of-whack attachment to celebrities: "You really get to love them. They don't know you. But you love them. But you love, I think, what you imagine they are. You put more into the person to a certain extent than they may even be giving out on the screen, because they represent a dream. You lose yourself in those people." As far back as 1983, author Barbara Goldsmith, in a New York Times Magazine piece titled: *The Meaning of Celebrity*, described a society that "encourages us to manufacture our fantasies while simultaneously destroying our former role models and ripping away the guideposts of the past. The result is that we have created synthetic celebrities whom we worship, however briefly, because they vicariously act out our noblest or basest desires."

On a small scale, it can be someone choosing to change their own style of clothing in order to dress a certain way because "so and so" dresses that way and looks awesome. On a much larger scale, it is a teenager who commits suicide because their favorite celebrity did the same in a show or in real life. We say to our children, "So if all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you do it too?" We also know the importance of our children having what we call the right "role models," and we analyze our children's friends because we know that "birds of a feather flock together." We are keenly aware that folks pick up the habits of the people they see day after day.

So, have you ever struggled with the question: "Who am I?" Perhaps you are struggling with the question right now. Or, have you ever wondered about who you might become in the future? All of these are issues of what we call "personal identity." While the Bible does not use that kind of language, it does address the issue in the Baptism of Jesus at the Jordan, as well as in the baptism that we have received from the command of Jesus in Matt. 28, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." We read in our Gospel lesson: "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased (Mark 1:9-11).'"

Christ's baptism by John in the Jordan River shows us who God is. God is the almighty Father who approves of his beloved Son. God is the Son, the Word made flesh, standing in the Jordan River. God is the Holy Spirit, the breath of his mouth, who descends on Jesus like a dove. These are not three gods, but one God. For the Father so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son to save us, that whoever believes in him, by the power of the Holy Spirit, will not perish but have eternal life. There is only one God, the Triune God who saves us. This same Triune God meets us in baptism. And, when God meets us, as he does in baptism, it is not an empty meeting. He is there and doing great things!

But why should Jesus be baptized? John's baptism gave the forgiveness of sins, as he himself testified (Mark 1:4). Jesus had no sin that needed to be forgiven. Not only that, Jesus was, as John had already publicly preached, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Why should the

innocent Lamb of God come to receive a washing that was for sinners? Jesus explains it in Matthew 3:15. He said, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." What does this mean: "to fulfill all righteousness?" It means that Jesus came to do everything right on our behalf. He came to live a perfect life that would be a substitution for all sinners. He became sin for us and suffered and died on the cross to receive the divine punishment that we deserve so that we might escape.

We need to understand that the baptism of Christ and our baptisms are related through the cross. Yet, Jesus' baptism and ours stand on opposite sides of the cross. Kurt Marquart writes:

We may think of our Lord's baptism as a great tide that washes the world's sins onto Him and sweeps Him (and them) *to* the cross. It is precisely at His baptism, therefore, that Jesus stands revealed as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). *From* the cross, however, flows to us the saving tide of our baptisms (1 Pt. 3:20-21!), full of God's mercy, forgiveness, and life. [*The Saving Truth*, Vol. 1, page 89]

Through the cross, Jesus' baptism is the reverse of ours. In other words, in his baptism, Jesus takes our sin to the cross, buries it in his death, and rises from the dead to assure us that all has been truly done. Our baptism is not merely an empty symbol that we are members of the church, but it actually offers and gives something. It is a participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul writes in our epistle lesson: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Baptism gives what Christ has gained by becoming sin for us at his own Baptism - forgiveness, life, and salvation. Ananias commands Saul (Paul): "Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name (Acts 22:16)."

The name of Jesus has a content. His name - his person and work - is everything revealed about him in the Bible. The name of God is placed upon us when the waters of baptism are applied. This name continues to grow in us as Jesus indicates in his institution of Baptism, "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." He is with us always. We have his name and are growing it. Or, we could simply quote the words of Paul in Galatians 3:27, "As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." So, who are you? And, what might you become in the future? Or, what is your "personal identity?" In your baptism, you are a Christian. You have "put on" Jesus.

We do not need to travel to Palestine to be "closer" to Jesus, nor do we need to create for ourselves artificial ways to "feel" Jesus, nor do we have to find an identity in sin or sinful celebrities. The Jordan of Jesus' baptism flows to us freely through the baptismal font of every Trinitarian church throughout the whole wide world, and continues to be a baptism that is present and lived every day. Having been made participants in the death and resurrection of Christ by baptism, as our epistle lesson states, his forgiven and reborn people are now called to live a new life of service to God and man by the power of the same risen Jesus Christ whom they have "put on" in baptism. We have a name that we carry wherever we go. We have a name that is supposed to be lived in and through us - when we daily die to sin and rise in new life.

Baptism is more than just an initiation rite into the Church. It is more than just a one-time event. It is an enduring reality in our lives and describes who we are as long as we understand that Christ's name has a content that changes who we are and how we live. It is a regeneration, a renewal, a recreation that is ours now and forever. For Luther it was synonymous with the entire Christian life. He says in the *Small Catechism* that Baptism "indicates that the Old Adam in us should by **daily** contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." Please allow me to quote Marquart again:

In an age like ours (2 Tim. 3:1-4), when all that is holy, good and noble is trampled underfoot in a demon-ridden Gadarene stampede (St. Mk 5:1ff.) into unbridled self-indulgence, the practical implications of Holy Baptism must ever be kept before our eyes. In all facets of life - whether money, clothes, work, education, politics, cars, entertainment, or anything else - and in ever decision involving these, Christians need to strive *with* their baptism against their flesh, not with the flesh against baptism and the Spirit! [*The Saving Truth*, Vol. 1, page 94]

You see, since Baptism is about your identity, it is not something that happened one day and was forgotten, unless you really do want to forget who you are - a forgiven child of God headed for heaven. Who you are and what you do is inextricably linked to the name of the Triune God who teaches and reveals himself to us specifically through Jesus, the Son. Christ has defeated the powers of hell for us and freely gives us victory in the washing away of all our sin in baptism. Having put on Christ, as the apostle Paul writes, we are no longer defined by sin, but by forgiveness and newness of life. Sin is dead and buried, and we live a new life in Jesus. Luther therefore would hurl a defiant "I am baptized!" in Satan's teeth whenever he would seek to torment him with accusations of sin and hell. Christians daily assert their precious identity in baptism as the family of God, who have an eternal inheritance in heaven, and with that courageously do battle against everything that would fight to take that identity away.

So, if you feel the need to fall into Celebrity Worship Syndrome, where you become absorbed with someone to establish your identity and sense of fulfillment - if you need to lose yourself in someone who can really help - try your baptism, where the celebrity is Jesus and all that he has done, who not only knows and loves you, but who gives you a new name into a new family that has an eternal inheritance! Finally, live that name every day by daily dying to sin and rising in him, who has washed your sin away!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott