

Richmond Hill
Richmond, Virginia
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1 Epiphany
Matthew 3:13-17
The Baptism of Jesus
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The sacrament of new life

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (*Matthew 3:13-17*)

Tonight I want to talk about the sacrament of new life.

The Baptism of Jesus has been the story associated with this first Sunday after the Epiphany for many centuries. It is a powerful story. It introduces baptism as a sacrament into Christianity – what has become one of the two universal sacraments of the Christian faith. Christians fight over baptism, of course. A whole group of Christians insist that only baptism by persons who are mature enough to profess their own faith is valid – whatever valid means. Roman Catholics have from time to time insisted on the rebaptism of Protestant Christians who join the Catholic communion – but this is not official doctrine or practice these days. Fighting over the validity of baptisms is one of those weird things that Christians do with what Jesus did and said, which have very little to do with his spirit.

In fact, I think we could say that this kind of conversation, even if in some sense it is unavoidable to Christian institutions, is really weird when applied to Jesus and his teaching. Probably the worst thing about it is that it gets us majoring in minors, and misses the whole point of baptism. The baptism of Jesus is about the sacrament of new life. It is an event which identifies a pattern which is the special and normative pattern for Christianity. Most Christians agree that baptism isn't, as a sacramental act, something you do over and over. But the pattern, the spiritual pattern, of baptism is what we do over and over all through our lives.

It is the sacrament of new life. And here's the pattern of the sacrament of new life, as told by Jesus at his baptism: You are underwater; you surrender yourself in hope; you are beloved by God, made whole.

1. You are underwater.
2. You surrender yourself in hope.
3. You are beloved by God, made whole.

1. In the sacrament of new life, you are underwater.

Everybody old enough to bring themselves into this chapel this evening knows what it is like to feel like you are underwater. In fact, if you hadn't felt that way, or at least felt threatened that you might be feeling that way, you probably wouldn't have made the effort to come here in the first place. I can tell you that's true for me. Why in the world would I be making the effort to live in a religious community, praying three times a day on the clock, and attempting both to maintain and to support for others the maintenance of a personal discipline of prayer and service, if I didn't know that there is a chaos out there that is always present, always at hand, always able to suck me down into despair?

To be under water is to know that you are not capable of figuring out your life for yourself, or of knowing exactly what you should be doing, or of managing your own behavior – and certainly not of managing the behavior of others.

We spend a lot of our time – and a lot of people spend most of their time – trying to keep our heads above water. Of course we do, and let me tell you it's an important activity. I don't regret it for a minute.

But what happens is this – our lives become governed by the business of keeping our heads above water, both morally and practically. Morally, we want to keep feeling good about ourselves. If we are doing wrong, our guilt may drive us into charitable activities just to make up for those bad feelings. And practically, we want to keep ourselves solvent. So we become risk-averse and act out of fear, like the man who buried his talent in the ground.

The worst effect of our being under water is that we cut out the things we do and the concerns we have that relate to the human community. So afraid of being under water economically or politically, the Governor and General Assembly cut money from educating the children of Richmond rather than increasing the taxes of those who have money or cutting funds from the children of the affluent. Being under water makes good people do bad things. The needs of others become even more peripheral to us than they were before, and we put ourselves in gated communities of our own making.

When Jesus joined in the baptism of John, he said he was doing it because this was necessary to fulfill all righteousness. That is to say, John, this is the way things are. We are all under water. It isn't a moral condition. It is a life condition. Rich and poor, good and bad, we are all in it. Every one of us is a part of this.

In the sacrament of new life, you are underwater.

2. You surrender yourself in hope.

There are two reasons for surrender: despair and hope. I have surrendered for both reasons in my life. There is always – always – a piece of despair in surrender. If there isn't, it isn't surrender, it's just another act of control.

But there is a surrender that isn't completely voluntary, and we all must do it.

In the sacrament of new life, you surrender yourself in hope. That is to say, you admit that you are under water.

We do this in big ways and in little ways. The things that overwhelm us are constantly at hand. But there is really, ultimately, no way to surrender unless someone gives us hope – the knowledge that even though we can't do it for ourselves, there is a power greater than ourselves who will restore us to sanity.

What is sanity? Sanity is a sober and clear evaluation of your situation, of the facts which are before you, of the things that can change and the things that cannot be changed, and of your own resources. Sanity may initially produce a knowledge of limitations, but ultimately it is the condition which makes vision and imagination possible. It's just that most of us like to live in our imagination, and we attempt to preserve that world of our own imagination, while underneath the imagination the clouds and misgivings grow stronger and stronger, telling us that the flood is coming, and that we are indeed underwater.

Here's the paradox. We are put here with the God-given instinct to fight for our own survival and the survival of others. We learn we need also to fight for our own virtue. But that very fight eventually and inevitably brings us to the experience of our own limitations, and the death of our ambitions, and the threat of surrender.

In Jesus' baptism, just as in situation after situation in his life, including finally his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, he surrendered himself in hope to the God of his understanding. And this was true here, this day at the Jordan River, in his baptism.

Note that surrender doesn't necessarily mean inactivity or passivity. Rather, it may mean putting yourself all the way out there, fully committing yourself to life, knowing that you will then be a part of the change that is happening, not in control of it. But without surrender, there is no hope, only the constant threat of failure. Surrender admits the reality of death, the reality of sin, and the reality of failure, but believes in the life of God.

In the sacrament of new life, you are underwater, you surrender yourself in hope, and you are beloved by God, made whole.

3. In the sacrament of new life, you are beloved by God, made whole.

When Jesus came up from the water the Holy Spirit fell upon him and he heard a voice in his hearts saying, *outov estin o uiov mou o agaphtov en w eudokhsa*. This is my

beloved son in whom I find great pleasure and joy. These weren't just words for Jesus, I would assume. The Spirit fell upon him and he knew the love of God, and he knew that God was his father, and he knew the joy of God's pleasure and acceptance of him. God's love.

This, then, is the experience he had, and the experience he began to evoke in and share with other people. He knew the total acceptance and love of God.

This experience for him came after the other two experiences: being underwater and admitting it, being submerged, and surrendering in hope. Then came the confirmation.

What is this love of God, then? It is the love of God for a son. Not the love of God for someone who is perfect. Not the love of God for someone who is in control. Not the love of God for someone who is virtuous. Not the love of God for someone who has no bad feelings about himself or herself. Not the love of God for someone who never does any wrong. Not the love of God for someone who fully understands the world or who is living their life perfectly.

No, this is the love of God for a son. And the measure of the love of God for a son is that it is not dependent upon his success or his mastery of everything that God himself has allowed to go out of control. That's how you can tell it is love, not simply admiration. That's how you can tell it's love, not simply approval. That's how you can tell it's love, not simply ownership.

I have a little idea what it is to love a son – I have three of them, and one daughter. I have different experiences with my three sons. I have different feelings about all three of them. I have different approval feelings about them. I would like to give each one of them different instructions and different advice. But none of those differences affects my love for them.

The love is imperfect, because I am imperfect. But it is absolute and unconditional in its quality. I did not invent it, and I could no more get rid of it – and believe me, there are times I have tried to get rid of it – than I can stop my own heart from pumping. If that is the way I am with my four children, how do you think our heavenly father is with us.

Jesus lived through this sacrament of new life – and this sacrament has three aspects to it, no matter in what order they come: you are underwater, you surrender yourself in hope, and you are beloved by God, made whole. I don't care what words you say – all I care about is that in your spirit you would know this gift of God's spirit, the one that descended on Jesus as he came up out of the water, that you would know in your deepest self this day this love of your heavenly father for you, that you are his beloved child, and that – no matter what you may think of yourself – he takes such great pleasure in you.

AMEN.