

First Presbyterian Church
Luke 3:15-22, "Baptism and Identity"
by Rev. Matt Johnson, 1/12/2025

Group identity is a powerful thing.

When Bill Murray's character in What About Bob explained
the reason for his recent divorce, he said,

"There are two kinds of people in the world:

Those who love Neil Diamond, and those who don't."

You might not feel so strongly about Neil Diamond as Bob Wiley does,
but there's probably some category of distinction that you use in daily life.

My people are like this, those other people are like that.

Extremists rely on extremely strong group identity to carry out such atrocities.

Politicians rely on group identity to propel themselves to power.

Nations rely on group identity to justify war against those who are
not like us.

But just because it can be used for bad purposes

doesn't mean the phenomenon of group identity is always a bad thing.

I see God's people called to a very high level of communal identity
in Scripture.

Christianity is not just a bunch of people who happen to share

some beliefs in common, or like the same kind of music,

but a group so closely identified with each other

that they can be called a body, the family of God,

a building made of living stones,

held together by the one Spirit who was given

to them by their one Creator.

So we can see that the creation of group identity can work

in both positive and negative ways.

In the church calendar, this is the day that the church around the world

remembers Jesus' baptism, which is a profound act of establishing identity.

We, as followers of Jesus who are baptized in his name,

rally around this identity of Jesus

as the basis for our own identity together.

But sometimes we must wonder:

What makes our religious group-identity different from these extremists?

Can we have an identity that is clear and strong
and yet also able to avoid belittling or even oppressing the “others”
who are “outside” of us?

...

The two baby boys born to Elizabeth and Mary at the beginning of Luke’s gospel
are all grown up here in the third chapter:

John and Jesus are now 30 year old men.

John was crafting an identity for God’s people in his own right.

Out in the wilderness, away from the power center of the city,
way off in the margin, Crazy John was preaching and baptizing,
eating bugs and preparing the way for God’s Messiah –
or Anointed One – to take center stage one day.

And he was there – right there in the crowd. Jesus of Nazareth.

John knew who he was. When the people start wondering,

“Is John the Messiah?” he says,

“No not me. But one who is more powerful than I will come,
and I am not worthy to tie up his sandals.”

John *grew up* with a connection to Jesus. They’re family.

But I don’t think you can ever be *totally* sure that someone is the Messiah.

That’s the importance of this baptism scene which initiates Jesus’ ministry.

In this baptism scene, I believe that Jesus’ core identity is revealed
not only for the people who would be his disciples,
but also for Jesus himself.

Luke tells us in Lk 2:52 that over time, Jesus grew in wisdom and stature,
and in favor with God and people.

Jesus *grew up*. He did not come out of Mary’s womb
a fully formed adult.

Jesus grew in wisdom – which means he wasn’t always as insightful
as we see him in the Bible. He grew in favor with God and with people.

If we take Jesus’ humanity as seriously as Luke does,
we realize that Jesus needed to learn who he was,
how he related to God – and to the people of God!

And so I want to take you through characteristics of Jesus' identity which are layered tightly together in this passage which help us understand the very unique identity of Jesus and *through him* to understand the unique group identity of those who live by faith in him.

Jesus – baptizing with the Holy Spirit.

In v. 16, John says he is baptizing them with water, but the one who is coming “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” This sets up another line written by Luke in the book of Acts 1:5 where Jesus gives instructions that the disciples should wait in Jerusalem where, “you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

What in the world does this mean? Water is a symbol – a powerful symbol – of cleansing, renewal, life, healing, all kinds of things.

Baptizing with water is using a symbol.

But the one who is coming has the authority and power to connect directly with God's empowering presence – the Holy Spirit.

This water is a symbol, John says, but what is coming next is direct relationship with God.

The group identity we have as followers of Jesus means we, too, enter into a direct connection with our Creator through the Spirit.

We also see Jesus – a judge like God.

The preaching of John the Baptist is summarized beginning in Luke 3 verses 7-9, where he calls the people to bear the fruit of repentance, for *God* will chop down and burn all the trees that don't bear good fruit.

Then in vv. 15-18, where our reading for today begins, we find a repetition of the themes from the first section: a call to repentance, and a warning of judgment.

But we also find something different:

In the second passage, John speaks not of God, but of the Messiah. His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will separate the wheat from the chaff.

John is demonstrating that the things once spoken of about God (vv. 7-9)
are also true of God's Anointed One (vv. 15-18).

Jesus came to show love and invite the world into the way of love.
But God's love has no substance if there is no justice for wrongdoing.
John makes sure the people know that
the Messiah of love will also be a judge like God.

For our group identity, this means we are people who are judged by God
but who are saved by grace. There is no place for boasting or arrogance
– or judgmentalism! – in such a community.

Jesus – baptized by John in the wilderness

Have you ever wondered *why* Jesus submits himself to the baptism of repentance
offered by Crazy John in the wilderness?
It certainly wasn't a requirement of the Jewish Law.

The significance in terms of Jesus' identity
is that he came not to be above humanity,
but to be among humanity and to identify especially
with those who felt they were running out of options.

Why else would you leave the city, go out into the wilderness,
and get dunked by a guy like John?

At that point, your options are probably running pretty thin.
And Jesus says, "Yes. This is what I'm about. I'm on this path with all of you."
It's not that Jesus needed to repent,
but he was demonstrating his connection
to the new thing God was doing through John the Baptist.

This act shows his solidarity with all those
who were looking for a true path to God
outside of the power centers of Jerusalem and Rome.
This is creating strong group identity.

Jesus – Anointed with the Holy Spirit

After he is baptized it says Jesus was praying, and the heavens opened up.
The curtain was drawn back on Jesus, the heavens opened,
and it was revealed that things were not as they seemed with this man.

There was something more beneath the surface
of this simple carpenter, and for a brief moment,
heaven shone a different light on Jesus.

While the heavens are opened,
Luke describes the Holy Spirit as descending *in bodily form* like a dove.
Here Jesus is identified as one who is himself anointed by the Holy Spirit –
standing in the tradition of King David.

When the voice speaks out from heaven,
we enter one of the only moments in the Bible where all three persons
of the Trinity are actively revealed in the same moment.
God the Father speaking from heaven,
God the Son coming out from the waters of baptism,
God the Holy Spirit anointing Jesus as a dove.

This marks those who follow Jesus as a group that is different
than just a humanitarian service organization, or a social justice movement.
We who are baptized into Christ and are filled with God's Spirit
are connected to the eternal things of the universe which go
deeper than any human organization or government.

Finally, we see Jesus – a beloved child of God.

At the end of v. 22 we read, **“a voice came from heaven,
‘You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased.’”**

Jesus needed to know God's belovedness
before he went into the desert to face temptation,
before he began his public ministry which would lead to the cross.
We, too, are identified as people who have accepted God's love and embrace.

It's human nature to focus our identity on various centers of power –
cities, money, influence, honor, coercive force, intellectual accomplishment.
We use these things to tell us what is safe and unsafe,
what is better for us and worse for us,
what is up and what is down in our world.

But Jesus doesn't accept our way of ordering things.
He is always destabilizing and decentering our human-made centers.
He's upsetting and overturning our expectations at every turn.
He's everything we need and nothing that we expect.

This is why I do not fear having a strong group-identity that is centered on Jesus.
As soon as we become too full of ourselves, our purposes, our power,
our traditions, our heritage, our customs, our kind of people ...
Jesus will simply flip the script on us and say,
"Oh, you thought you were the insiders?
You thought you could control things because of your special identity?
No, sorry, that way of thinking puts you on the outside.
I came to love the very same people you exclude and despise."

This is why Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf says
that Jesus is a de-centered center,
who enables us to create space for truly self-giving love.

When we have received such love, nothing else is ever the same.
You know that you are loved – you don't need to coerce others to love you.
You know that you belong – you don't need to fight for recognition.
You know that you have what you need for life –
you don't need to live with anxiety and fear.

In fact, when our communal identity is centered around Jesus,
we hear those same words spoken to us that Jesus heard in his own baptism:
"You are my child, whom I love. With you I am well pleased."

We will respond with a hymn that is probably new to you.
It explores the identity we take on when we are baptized into Jesus'
death and resurrection.
The hymn compares the baptismal pool to a tomb of water – a place of death!
For when we come to Jesus in faith we die to ourselves
so that we might also rise to new life with Christ.