

Baptism of our Lord Sunday
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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Earlier this month I went to The Field Museum's exhibit on tattoos. I noticed that each tattoo was a bit different. Some were identifiers, like the tattooed numbers on Nazi prisoners. Others signified status within a tribe or group. Some were even a form of resistance. One type of tattoo even attempted to harness the powers of dead people or animals by mixing their ashes into the ink. As I walked through the exhibit, I began to notice is that tattoos were more than an image. Tattoos were often indicators or reminders that carried meaning. The tattoo was just the beginning of a story.

Moments ago, I had the privilege of tattooing Avery and Camden. While I didn't wear plastic gloves or turn on a tattoo machine, I did have special substance I placed on their skin in a particular design. There, on their foreheads, I traced the sign of the cross. Sure, to some it's a blot of oil that's probably dried already, but this is an invisible tattoo. This cross-shaped blot of oil is an indicator, it's a reminder, and it carries meaning. That cross of oil is the beginning of a story.

So too in today's gospel from Matthew we heard the beginning of a story at Jesus' baptism. As he emerges from the water, a dove descends and a voice from

heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Now, if a dove coming to land on Jesus like a zoo trainer isn't enough to grab our attention, then a booming voice from heaven just might. This voice uses language that draws us into our first reading from Isaiah where the prophet said, “here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom I my soul delights.” Those two readings sound similar. In fact, there's a good indication that when translated differently the booming voice from heaven in Matthew actually said, “This is my *Servant*, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” I won't bore you with the details of this translational process, so for this sermon let's just put them both together and say, this is Jesus the Servant-Son, the Beloved. (Does that all sound good to you?) Isaiah does not only stop with “here is my servant” but rather the prophet goes on to say, “I have put my spirit upon him he will bring forth justice to the nations.”

You see, Jesus' baptism is not just some passing moment or image. The event is not something benign that we can make into stain glass windows and ritualize to make people come to church. Jesus' baptism is the beginning of an incredible story, a story foretold back in the days of Isaiah. Jesus's baptism sets him apart as God's loved servant-son. It begins a story of justice. It's a story where Jesus will be seen as the Moses-like teacher who fulfills the Jewish law. He'll be upheld as a compassionate, healer. Jesus will be vocal against the religious establishment. He'll journey from Galilee to Jerusalem and will be crucified. Yet, he will rise again and send us out to

baptize all people reminding us that God is always with us even to the end of the age.

That, is what is beginning here. That mark on Avery's head and Camden's head and your head is a tattoo that says so much more than a smudge of oil. That is a tattoo with a story. It's a tattoo with meaning. It's a tattoo that you will never, ever be able to laser off no matter how hard you try, because, here's the deal, if you like it or not, you are a loved child of God. It's a gift that reminds us that no matter how many pants sizes you go up or down, no matter how many times you nag and complain, no matter how much money you give to the poor, no matter your skin color, no matter your country of birth, no matter your sexual orientation, no matter how many times you come to church, no matter what you do or do not do, YOU are a child of God. You've got the tattoo and you're stuck with it. So, like that tattoo of your ex-'s name inside a heart, you're going to have to deal with this tattoo too.

So, when you ready to stop covering up your tattoo, and when you're ready to tell the story of your tattoo, then you have an opportunity to become the story. When you realize that being powerless to love can be a transformational thing, then let's get to work. Together we'll work to look at Jesus's example and work for justice. You see, the best gift of baptism is that once you realize that you don't have to do anything at all, then you're set free to live the best life possible.

What exactly does that look like? Well, time and again I say this same thing to church members – if you don't want to do something then don't. Jesus opened our

eyes to the tremendous gift of life. Don't throw the gift away with endless complaints and criticism. This is a difficult shift for us in our culture. It's much easier for us to complain on social media than to do something about it. We are stuck in a capitalistic society that values things and profit over thanks and people. And it's nothing new. Almost fifty years ago the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. realized this problem when he said, "We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered." You see, we live in a world of great wealth, and great inequality. Our greater consumption demands lower cost. Our demand for more products at lower prices, actually comes at a highest of costs. Namely, the cost of slave labor of men, women, and children around the globe. Although we don't often talk about human trafficking, it is the second largest and fastest growing illegal trade in the world. Modern-day slavery where people are in bondage through fraud, force, or coercion so that we can have cheaper prices and fulfill our every desire is unjust.

Yet, this is nothing new. This was true in Jesus' time and is true in ours. However, Jesus gives us a pathway to work against the system to bring justice. Jesus takes his baptismal tattoo and uses it as the beginning of the story – the first step to recognizing the value of all people.

Today when you saw Camden and Avery baptized, and every time you see a baptism, I hope you're reminded of the beginning of the story. I hope you use it as a reset button to commit yourself to learning, leading, and loving. I pray you see it as the beginning of the story. When you gather here each week you are reminded of that tattoo, that mark of God's love. And when you read the news and face palm, I hope you remember the tattoo on your forehead. I hope you stop and remember the acceptance, love, and grace of our God. Or when you get in an argument or say something stupid, pause and remember the tattoo for you are loved so that you might share the love. And when it feels like the world is imploding, we gather here to point the holy tattoo as a reminder that God is with us always.

My friends, there it is. Baptism is a marvelous gift of love. It's a moment of identity. It's a tattoo for life. It's not the end of the story, but merely the beginning. And Jesus's baptism is calling us to watch him carefully. This is one special dude who is going to turn the world upside-down. This guy is going to teach us justice, push us to love, and make us see the world in a whole new way. We've come to the end of the sermon, so now we pause to meditate on our tattoo, but then we'll gather to see our baptismal tattoo come to life at this table, and afterwards we'll turn to face the back to put our baptismal tattoo into practice, and finally we'll come back together again next week. We'll gather to be refreshed in love. We'll gather to be reminded of our baptismal tattoo. We'll gather to learn from Jesus, God's beloved servant-son. Amen.