

Baptism of Our Lord  
Wicker Park Lutheran Church  
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki  
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In our readings, over the past few weeks, Jesus went from being born in a manger, to being a toddler with some interesting gifts, and today, he was baptized in his late 20s or early 30s. The Bible doesn't tell us much about those twenty-five or so years since last week's story. Perhaps, there wasn't anything special going on; maybe, Jesus was just like every other young child—with times of celebration and sorrow, with awkward moments and proud moments, a childhood filled with the ordinary and the memorable. Today, we explicitly heard about one of Jesus's life-defining moments.

We heard that Jesus came to John for baptism. John hesitated, and then, after Jesus told him it was proper to be baptized to fulfill all righteousness, John consented. Now, this is the second time we've heard Matthew use the word translated here as "righteous." The first time we heard it was when Joseph (you know, Jesus's adoptive father) was labeled a righteous man. At that time, the term "righteous" explained Joseph's character and why he wasn't going to publicly disgrace Mary for being pregnant with a baby that wasn't his. And, while that word might not seem important, the word "righteous" in Matthew is a big deal! It'll come up over-and-over again—we'll hear it in the Beatitudes, again when talking about almsgiving, and again when talking about the best way to live. It comes up throughout Matthew's gospel. And, there's a reason why.

Last week, I mentioned that Matthew gives a lot of weight to the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament. In those books and in Judaism as a whole, righteousness is

important. Righteousness is about giving generously to the poor and, by extension, offering loving acts. Some rabbinic traditions even saw righteousness as being more important than all of the other commandments combined. Righteousness, for Joseph, for John, and for Jesus is about living in a right relationship with God and others.<sup>1</sup> So, you see, Jesus is baptized to emphasize the importance of that relationality—the importance of being in relationship with all of creation.

And, being in relationship with others and being connected with all of creation is ridiculously hard. By nature, all of us are a bit selfish. Even when we, generally, have our physiological and safety needs met, we struggle to move up Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and get to a place where love and belonging are emphasized.<sup>2</sup> This selfishness is made know when we buy more food than we could ever eat and, then, we throw it away as we contribute to ecological damage and depriving the hungry. We do it when our concern for safety gets confused with our unfounded fear of the other—that is, the one who looks, acts, talks, lives, and sets goals that are at odds with our priorities. We reject relationality when being “right” dominates our relationships and when we fail to understand the gift of diversity. And, it happens every day. It’s the frustration with the other political party. It’s the anxiety of another’s race or sexuality. It’s the ways we belittle those who are different than us city people— you know, those who are suburban or rural or southern or costal— those people who vote differently, who work differently, and who understand the world in very different ways.

And, while Jesus was living in all that same confusion and diversity, Jesus was baptized, and as he emerged from the water we heard a voice. It’s a voice that draws our attention to something novel. It’s a voice that is different from every other gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. “Righteousness.”

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

You see, in all the synoptic gospels (that is, Mark and Luke along with Matthew) a voice speaks as Jesus emerged from the water. However, in Mark and Luke the voice said, “you are my beloved son,” while Matthew’s said, “this is my beloved son.” In Matthew, this voice is public and communal. This isn’t a private moment and this isn’t a time just for Jesus’s closest friends. In Matthew, this is a defining group experience built on relationality. An experience where Jesus and all those around become aware of Jesus’s identity. An identity that is a summary of Isaiah 42. It’s the identity that is fully developed and explained in today’s first reading. It’s an identity that is focused on faithfully bringing justice to all nations. It’s a reminder that although justice is hard, Jesus will not be crushed until justice is on all the earth. For, God, as Isaiah said, has called Jesus to righteousness. And, that righteousness looks like release for those imprisoned, openness for those who are closed-off, and, in a world steeped in status-quo, a new thing springing forth.

You see, in Matthew, this Jesus will create a new family. A family whose primary role is not to be right, but rather, a family that wants to be in relationship. It’s a family that is steeped in the Jewish belief of righteousness. A family that finds honor in giving oneself to the greater good by serving. A family that forgives and works to understand. A global family that shares wealth frequently, freely, and foundationally. It’s a family that Jesus received at baptism, a family we received at our baptism, and it’s a global family that is a gift from God.

And, like families do, there are going to be moments that irk us. There will be times where our humanity and ego dominate. But, then, there will be glimpses of God’s relational vision—places where people find God’s gift in this church while hosting fellowship time or gathering for Meet & Eat so that we can build deeper relationships with one another. Or, we will catch that same vision of God’s family as we gather to

feed the hungry each month or write letters to our elected officials in support of refugees and asylum-seekers. Together, we'll come to see that our family is larger than this place as we generously give of our abundant gifts to our ministry partners to embody that idea that we a loving family, that we are in relationship with one another, and that we are in this together.

So, friends, I'm going to leave us here as we prepare to re-affirm our baptismal identity and to remember this loving family that we've been given. Because, today's readings reminded us of Jesus's identity and the identity we receive in baptism. It's a reminder that we have been given this global church family where God's love is ever-present. It's an opportunity to recognize our familial bonds as we strive to forgive, serve, and give. It's a glimpse of God's vision—a place for all, an opportunity to grow, and a family of love. Amen.