

Epiphany 1A Sermon  
Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29  
Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

In the name of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

You've heard it all your life and it's still absolutely true, we all want to belong to (that is, be accepted into) something greater than ourselves. The other night I was flipping through the channels – who knew the writers' strike would make me watch so much Discovery and Learning Channel – but I stopped on the National Geographic Channel. They had a program on about initiation rituals and I decided to check it out.

The first group they covered was the culture of primarily young adults in America and elsewhere, who are deeply into body modification – tattooing and piercings mainly – but amongst these people there is a subculture of people who are involved in “suspensions.” If you haven't heard of it, a suspension is where someone allows someone else to pierce them with large gauge needles, almost the diameter of my little finger, through their skin and fatty tissue, and then suspend them by these hooks, through the use of ropes and pulleys. For those of us on the outside of this culture, the practice seems surreal and almost stomach-turning. But those who were interviewed talked of having overcome their natural fear, survived the pain, experienced a sense of euphoria associated with being suspended – and interestingly, of being a part of a group who looked, thought and felt like they did. In order to be a real part of the hardcore world of body modification, apparently the latest rite of passage is being suspended from the

ceiling by hooks through your back. I know. We who would never consider it, think it's absolutely bizarre. But rites of passage have always been around, and have always been an important way of gaining cultural acceptance. Thankfully, we in the Christian Church, have baptism.

There are a couple of things I'd like for us to consider about our initiation rite of baptism here. The first is that while baptism *is* our initiation rite, it is much, much more. Historically, because baptism was more than initiation, it was incredibly problematic for the early Church. How in the world do you explain to people who have no concept of such things, the story of Jesus' baptism. After all, Jesus is God incarnate, isn't He? Literally, He's God on earth, right? By definition, godliness means perfection. And the early converts also learned that Jesus was born of Mary and therefore completely human. They were also told by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, in no uncertain terms that this human, Jesus of Nazareth was just like us in every way, "yet without sin." It is difficult enough for people to get their heads around the two natures of Jesus — human and divine — existing simultaneously. But after the early church converts got this point, they had to grapple with the Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism.

Jesus was fully man and yet without sin. So what was he doing down there in the river with this wild baptizer; the same John who, according to Matthew, was baptizing with water for repentance from sin. Matthew tells us that all of Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside were coming to John for baptism and cleansing of their sins. If this

crazy preacher was hollering for people to repent of their sins, seek forgiveness and be washed clean in the waters of baptism, what the heck was Jesus, *the one without sin*, doing there?

Jesus' baptism is important, so important that it is in all four Gospel accounts. Even though the early Church fathers struggled mightily to explain it to the pagan challengers of their day, it really does make sense if we think about it. You see, Jesus was indeed *the* sinless human, however, he never tried to avoid being around sin. In fact, he repeatedly got into trouble with the religious authorities of the day because he refused to shun the sinful of the community, as they did.

Jesus may not have sinned, but he lived where the sinners lived and spent his time where they spent their time. Therefore it made sense that He would want to undergo what they underwent when they sought amendment of life – and He had something important to teach them about that new life. I read something recently on this subject, and I love the imagery and language of it. Here is what Dr. H. King Oehmig had to say,

Jesus, here and throughout his ministry, makes it a point to go out of his way to mix socially with outcasts, with notorious sinners, beggars, the diseased, and the disenfranchised – to be “baptized” into their world so as to fully disclose Abba’s love for them as they *are* not as they *ought to be*. Stepping into the leftover bath-water of the unclean as *the Clean One* is nothing less than the spine-tingling manifestation of God’s *passion*. It discloses God’s willingness to go to any length to *show* – not just say – ‘I love you.’

Isn't that a great image? Jesus stepping into the tepid and somewhat fetid water left by throngs of unclean people as they came to John for the promise of amendment of life.

Jesus stepping in without hesitation – even though He certainly did not, for His own good, have to – in order to let us know unequivocally that God loves us, *as we are* – dirt and all. And that brings us to the second important point here.

When Jesus came up out of the water, after being baptized, Matthew tells us, “suddenly the heavens were open to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.” Jesus stepped into the waters of baptism so that God the Father might take that opportunity to send the Holy Spirit to seal Jesus and – to paraphrase what is so wonderfully put in our baptismal rite – to mark Jesus as God’s own forever. Baptismal water and the Holy Spirit are the elements through which Jesus shows that He is absolutely and irrevocably connected with the Father – the same connection Jesus wants for each one of us.

The next part of Matthew’s description is, to my way of thinking, one of the most wonderful statements in the Gospels. A voice rings out from heaven, and for everyone to hear, says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Everyone in this church this morning is someone’s child. And if you’ve been alive very many years, I promise that there have been times in your life when you craved hearing those words from your own father. Most of us have had times where we rebelled or for some other reason the relationship got strained with our parents. Or perhaps you were in the situation where the parent was just lost to you, either physically or emotionally and as a result those words never reached expression. Or perhaps the parent

thought he made the words plain to you, but somehow you two were just not speaking the same language. “This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” These words — spoken so seldom by most of us parents and longed for so often by all children — affirm not only that we are loved, which is a huge affirmation, but they also affirm that we are accepted and acceptable, just as we are, as my grandfather used to say, “warts and all.”

The Father’s affirmation of Jesus on the day of His baptism is not only incredibly important for Jesus, but it is just as important for us. While Jesus may have known who He was and what His relationship to the Father was, we oftentimes do not. We desperately need to hear *whose* we are and how unconditional that love is.

Jesus shared in baptism with us, not because *He* needed baptizing, but because *we* did and do. Jesus led the way across the muddy bank, going down to death in the baptismal water and coming up on the other side, resurrected and made new again, so that we would know how, and might have courage enough to do the same. Jesus calls us to share in the baptism by water and the Holy Spirit that washes away our old sinful natures and leaves us shiny new people, waiting to hear from the Father in heaven, the same words that Jesus heard – standing waist deep in the Jordan – “This is my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Now I admit that I don’t fully understand these people who pierce their flesh and hang from hooks. But I am willing to bet that if they had done that during Jesus’ time,

He would have attended the gathering. I'll bet you anything he would have eaten with them and would have taught them about unconditional love, while He exhibited that love for them. I bet He would have told them, "you don't have to go to this extreme to be acceptable. The Father and I love you exactly the way you are. Receive that love and let the Holy Spirit empower you and guide your life."

Jesus was perfect and Jesus was loved. We are nowhere near perfect and yet we too are loved. Jesus was sinless and was acceptable. We are broken and sinful people, from the top of our heads to the bottom of our toes and yet we too are acceptable. Jesus followed God without exception and was affirmed in His life. We, who wander far off and live lives surrounded by sin, are affirmed as God's beloved because Jesus went first and made the way for us. Now it's up to us to carry God's unconditional love for us into the world, to take the strength and power from the Holy Spirit, gained in our own baptisms and to live lives of disciples; God's people – not perfect – but reborn by water and the Spirit.

Amen.