



## Credible Witnesses

Matthew 3:13-17

A sermon by William M. Klein

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**13** Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. **14** John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" **15** 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. **16** 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. **17** And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Mt. 3:13-17 NRSV)

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Our Gospel reading for today tells Matthew's version of Jesus' baptism that marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It did not mark the beginning of his faithfulness and certainly not the moment God began loving him. Neither, we should note, did it mark the end of his faith journey. There was a whole lot of learning and living to be done his next three years.

In fact, the very next passage in Matthew's Gospel account tells us Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters and was driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted forty days and nights.<sup>1</sup> His baptism was a sort of beginning not an end.

I make this point because I think it is fair to say many Christians effectively believe their baptism and confirmation mark an end rather than a beginning. Many, many people go through programs of varying length to prepare them to join the church...and then, once they are baptized or make their profession of faith or are received by letter of transfer, they seem to think their work is done.

Roger Nishioka, Professor of Christian Education at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA, tells the following story. It is a story every pastors could tell. He writes:

*Kyle was nowhere to be found, and I missed him. In the weeks following his baptism and confirmation on Pentecost Sunday, he was noticeably missing... Back when I invited the young people of the church to become part of a confirmation class I was surprised when Kyle expressed immediate interest because he and his family had not been very actively involved in the life of the church. But he was serious in attending the classes and missed only rarely. Since he had not yet been baptized, he was not only confirmed but also baptized on Pentecost Sunday. It was a marvelous celebration for all the confirmands, their families, their mentors, and the whole church.*

*That is pretty much where it ended. When I checked in with Kyle and his folks, they all seemed a little surprised by my visit. I distinctly remember his mother saying, "Oh, well, I guess I thought Kyle was all done. I mean, he was baptized and confirmed and everything. Isn't he done?"<sup>2</sup>*

Nishioka's story was about a young man...but it was also about the young man's family wasn't it? They missed the point. At some level we all miss the point. At some level we tend to assume our baptism and profession of faith mean we are "all done" - that there is nothing more for us to learn - that that fulfills God's dream for us.

This isn't just a mistaken assumption...it is a nutty one. In other areas of our lives we would not think of behaving this way. I mean, would you be interested in going to a doctor who decided she knew all she ever needed to know when she finished her schooling, residency, and internship...and so never read another medical journal and slept through all the required medical board re-certification classes?

Or, think about friendship. If my great grandmother was right and a person is lucky to make three really good friends in a lifetime...can you imagine finally finding a truly great friend and then never putting in another moment of time nurturing that friendship?

Jesus came to give us life...but it was and is a gift to be unwrapped each day. His gift of abundant life requires assembly - and that assembly takes a lifetime of faithfulness. If we want to take hold of his gift and live fully, abundantly...daily discipline is essential.

I know I will never reach the point where my faithfulness is "all done." I suggest the same is true for you. The baptism into which you and I were baptized involves a lifetime of listening and discerning and learning and trusting. Church membership is about being attentive to the life of the Spirit...the way car ownership is about being attentive to car maintenance...the way true friendship is about being attentive to friendship maintenance. We never achieve perfection...but if we neglect the life of the Spirit we should not be surprised when the things of the Spirit routinely suffer.

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So, how might we go about tending to our baptismal vows? What can we do to make sure Christ's precious gift is not in vain?

At some level Jesus' own behavior may be a good guide. He came to John the Baptist at the Jordan River. John was baptizing people in the river. His baptism was about repentance - about helping the people acknowledge the ways in which God was not a part of their day-to-day, minute-to-minute lives. He was preparing them to be able to hear and receive what the Messiah would reveal to them.

Jesus came to John to be baptized. John realized immediately that Jesus did not need to be baptized...which is to say, Jesus was not in need of repentance. But Jesus insisted. I think Jesus insisted for all sorts of reasons...but surely the biggest reason was because he wanted to do the next thing God set before him to do. I do not think Jesus knew what would happen after that...and he did not need to know because he was certain God's Spirit would be with him to comfort and guide him.

And so when John objected to baptizing Jesus, Jesus essentially said to John, "You do what God has set before you to do...and so will I. Together we will put our hand into God's hand and trust him to show us the next step."

Every time someone is baptized - whether an infant or an adult - we are encouraged to renew our own baptism. We are encouraged to remember the beginning of our faith walk. We are encouraged, along with the one being baptized, to place our hand

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once again into the hand of God and recommit ourselves to trusting him to show us the next step we are to take.

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But baptisms do not take place every week, much less every day, to remind us of God's great gift. So what can we do daily to make sure Christ's precious gift is not in vain?

I can tell you to read your Bible every day. I can tell you to read devotional materials and to pray regularly. I can tell you to do a good deed daily, attend church regularly, and tithe. I can tell you to become part of a small accountability group. All these disciplines would be useful.

But unless an attentive attitude is at the heart of any of these disciplines you are apt to miss the point. Every spiritual discipline is meant to cultivate your awareness of God's presence, God's enormous love for you, and God's intention to be glorified in your life and through your example.<sup>3</sup>

In a sense, every spiritual discipline is useful only as it gives you the courage to let your lives become instruments through which God work's his grace-filled will in this world. When the word "courage" first came into the English language it came from a Latin word "**cor**" which means "heart." The original meaning of courage, then, was to tell the story of who you are with your whole heart.<sup>4</sup>

That is what happens when an attentive attitude is at the heart of who you are... when God is at the **core** of who you are. God becomes such a part of who you are that you don't just tell your story but you tell God's story with your whole heart. Or to put it another way, you become such a part of God that you become credible witnesses to what God's love looks like.

So may it be. Amen.



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## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> See Matthew 4:1f.

<sup>2</sup> Bartlett, David L. & Taylor, Barbara Brown, ed. 2010. Feasting on the Word. Year A, Vol. 1. Louisville: WJK Press, 236 & 238.

<sup>3</sup> Küng, Hans. 2009. What I Believe. NY: Continuum International Pub. Group, 54. John Calvin (the great Protestant Reformer) began his Geneva Catechism of 1542 with this fundamental question – "What is the main purpose of human life?" He gave the succinct answer – "To know God." As to the second question, "Why?" – "Because God has created us and put us in the world to be glorified in us."

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Brené. 2010. *The power of vulnerability*. TEDxHoutson – Filmed June 2010; Posted December 2010.