

Immersion

Matthew 3:13-17

3:13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

3:14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

3:15 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.

3:16 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.

3:17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."



Embrace of the Leper (Printed on front of bulletin.)



Jesus' Baptism (Printed inside of bulletin.)

Have you ever found yourself immersed into something, perhaps even unexpectedly immersed into something?

A drunk staggered through the countryside and stumbled on a Christian congregation carrying out a baptism service in the local river. The priest on seeing the drunk asks "Have you come to find Jesus brother?" "Sure have" says the drunk. So the priest grabs the drunk and ducks him under the water, after a few seconds he pulls him up and says "Have you found Jesus?" "NO!" replied the drunk. So the priest ducked him again. "Have you found Jesus?" "NO!" replied the drunk. So the priest ducked him again this time until the drunk was blue in the face! "For God's sake," Have you found Jesus?" brother! "NO!" replied the drunk. Are you sure this is where he fell in!

Here it is just the third Sunday after Christmas according to the lectionary, and if like that drunk I just referred to, you are looking for Jesus, the place to find him is not in a pre-school, elementary school or high school classroom. No, it's three weeks after Christmas and Jesus is an adult standing right smack dab in the middle of the muddle Jordan River. Talk about time flying. Just yesterday.....Have you caught yourself saying that? Just yesterday.

Just yesterday Jesus was a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths. Now here he is being baptized by who else but John the Baptizer. Gone are Magi. Gone are the shepherds. The angelic choir is not in concert. Three weeks later and John, who was so weird he had to be a Southern Baptist, three weeks later and John is dunking him, dipping him, submerging him, immersing him.

Which just feeds the Christians, yes it does. Which just gives them another dang thing to fuss and fight about, just another thing to mess up, which provides them one more

theological/doctrinal debate they can obsess about all the while not doing a thing Jesus said to do.

Am I telling the truth?

Sprinkling verses immersion, baptizing infants verses adult baptism and worrying about the so-called age of accountability factor. Triple dunked face forward or one time going backwards. Baptized as soon as you walk the aisle or baptized whenever they can fit it in the church/worship calendar or everybody gets baptized at Easter like many of the early churches practiced baptism. Is baptism necessary for salvation or is baptism an important ritual signifying entry into the church or a public profession of one's decision to follow Jesus? Do the Greek words used to describe Jesus' baptism by John make it 100% clear Jesus' baptism was immersion? Do the Christians have to mess up everything?

As you've probably already guessed, Wedgewood could care less if you are baptized. We actually were thrown out of a local Baptist association some 40 years ago for allowing people who had been baptized but not immersed to be members. Since then we've offered to sprinkle a man with AIDS who at the time was so weak he couldn't make it up the stairs to the baptismal pool and we've let a whole host of folk into the joint without requiring any baptism at all.

Personally, there's a part of me that would, if I could, and I can't because I'm Baptist and I can't require anything,----but there's a part of me that would like to require weekly, 60 second, total immersion baptisms for everyone, including the preacher, just to remind us we need to be nice to each other.

You know what I think-----I think the important thing is not that Jesus was even baptized; I think the important thing is not that John immersed Jesus into the muddy Jordan, but that Jesus immersed himself into the poverty, the illnesses, the depressions, the injustices, the complexities of the murderous, tragic histories of all he could see and touch and hug and speak to. If you want a visual of Jesus' immersion look on the front of the bulletin of the drawing of Jesus embracing the leper. That's a far better visual or concept of immersion or baptism than the drawing inside your bulletin of Jesus being dipped in the Jordan. What you see on your bulletin front---that's the dunking that matters! That's the baptism that counts! That's the immersion Jesus had and it's the immersion you and I need to have.

Immersion.-----There's a whole world out there waiting on us, waiting on us to immerse ourselves in their world so through us they can hear what Jesus heard at his baptism, words of love, words of acceptance, words of sonship and daughtership. "You-----you are my son. My beloved. I am pleased with who you are."

Too many people, to a large degree because of the church---too many people think God is so unhappy with them, that God is sitting up in heaven just frowning, and counting sin after sin after sin. Please---nobody is perfect, but too many individuals have left the Church convince them they are bad, they are worse than others, they are inherently dirty, when in fact, God is actually pleased with them and happy---no thrilled, to claim them as son and daughter. When's the last time you were immersed? When's the last time you embraced a leper?

"A seminary professor was vacationing with his wife in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. One morning they were eating breakfast in a little restaurant, hoping to enjoy a quiet, family meal. While waiting for their food, they noticed a distinguished looking, white haired man moving from table to table, visiting with the guests. The professor leaned over and whispered to his wife, "I hope he doesn't come over here." But sure enough, the man came over to their table. "Where are you folks from?" he asked in a friendly voice. "Oklahoma," they answered. "Great to have you here in Tennessee," the stranger said. "What do you do for a living?" "I teach at a seminary," he replied. "Oh, so you teach preachers how to preach, do you? Well, I've got a really good story for you." And with that, the gentleman pulled up a chair and sat down. The professor groaned and thought to himself, "Great. Just what I need -- another preacher story!" The man started, "See that mountain over there?" He pointed out the restaurant window. "Not far from the base of that mountain, there was a boy born to an unwed mother. He had a hard time growing up because every place he went, he was always asked the same question: 'Hey, boy, who's your daddy?' Whether he was at school, in the grocery store or drug store, people would ask the same question: 'Who's your daddy?' He would hide at recess and lunch time from other students. He would avoid going into stores because that question hurt him so bad.

When he was about 12 years old, a new preacher came to his church. He would always go in late and slip out early to avoid hearing the question, 'Who's your daddy?' But one day, the new preacher said the benediction so fast, he got caught and had to walk out with the crowd. Just about the time he got to the back door, the new preacher, not knowing anything about him, put his hand on his shoulder and asked him, 'Son, who's your daddy?' The whole church got deathly quiet. He could feel every eye in the church looking at him. Now everyone would finally know the answer to the question, Who's your daddy? The new preacher, though, sensed the situation around him and using discernment and said the following to the scared little boy: "Wait a minute! I know who you are. I see the family resemblance now. You are a child of God." With that, he patted the boy on his shoulder and said, "Boy, you've got a great inheritance -- go and claim it."

With that, the boy smiled for the first time in a long time and walked out the door a changed person. He was never the same again. Whenever anybody asked him, "Who's your daddy?" he'd just tell them, "I'm a child of God."

The distinguished gentleman got up from the table and said, "Isn't that a great story?" The professor responded that it really was a great story. As the man turned to leave, he said, "You know, if that new preacher hadn't told me that I was one of God's children, I probably would never have amounted to anything!" And he walked away.

The seminary professor and his wife were stunned. He called the waitress over and asked, "Do you know that man who was just sitting at our table?" The waitress grinned and said, "Of course. Everybody here knows him. That's Ben Hooper. He's the former governor of Tennessee!"

When's the last time you were immersed?

When's the last time God, through you, said to someone, "You are my child. I'm pleased with you."

Immersion. Isn't that what Christmas was all about? Isn't incarnation God immersing God's self into the world, into human flesh?

Vicky and I have a friend who recently retired and moved to Florida. Yes, "the Sunshine State". Guess what she's been doing. Soaking it up? Probably. Beaching it? I'm not sure that's proper English but I like phrasing it that way. Beaching it? Probably. Relaxing? More than likely. But also immersing her self.-----We received a Christmas card from her and learned that this past summer she took 700 youth to Holocaust concentration camps: Dachau, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Belzec (pronounced Biwzhets). In addition, she volunteered as a docent at a local Holocaust museum.

Immersion.

Most seminary students upon graduation look for traditional places of church employment. Imagine a group of seminary graduates who decide to plant themselves in the middle of poverty. Hey, it's happened right here in Charlotte. On Tuckaseegee Road there is a ministry called the Hyaets Community. These ministers don't go to the poverty. They live in the poverty.

How stupid. Buy a house in a bad section of town. Set up church in a run down area. How dim-witted. Didn't anybody teach them in seminary that you set up or move your church to the suburbs where the rich people and the nice middle class people live?

Immersion.

You know what I think, and don't get me wrong I'm thankful for any good that any church or any Christian does, but here's what I think. 99% of the ministry Christians and churches do is at a safe distance. The ministries of most steeples is more like sprinkling than immersion. It is done at a safe distance, and highly optimized to make the Christian feel good while incurring the least amount of headaches and inconveniences and, and write this down, and providing no opportunities for transformation on the Christian's part. Most of the ministry is done episodically, anti-septically, with white gloves on.

Will Campbell says he's noticed that in the cities in which he has been invited to speak there are about as many churches as there are homeless.

Don't get me wrong. I'm on your side. Jesus bothers me as much as he bothers you. I'm only going to be so Christian. By immersion I do not mean 24-7, 365. And the last thing I want to be is one of those Catholic priests married to the Church. But I do know this: there is a big difference between reading the daily headlines and reading an in depth article.

Immersion.

Jesus was being baptized in the Jordan in a land occupied by an imperial army surrounded by grinding poverty and refugees and illness.

What if Jesus is calling us out of conventional social constructs of conforming religion into the muddy Jordan River to establish relationships with people who feel like they are living in an occupied country or living in the wilderness of poverty and illness and depression?

Our scripture lesson for today really isn't Matthew 3:13-17. No, the scripture lesson actually is Matthew 3:18 to the end of the gospel because if you read that, and you don't even have to read it closely, you can read it with one eye shut, if you read that you will notice Jesus' real immersion, his real Baptism is not into the Jordan but into the misery and sadness and heartache of the world.

I said earlier that at Wedgewood we really don't care if you are baptized. That's only true in one sense. What we care about is if you are immersing yourself as Jesus immersed himself into the lives of those who need a friend, who need good news, who need the established government and established religion to get off their backs.

To become immersed into a different world than our own.

May God help us to love as fully and deeply as we are capable.