

## FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

### Matthew 3:13-17

*“It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.”*

When Tricia and I lived in Milwaukee, we met Ahman Green, who had just signed with the Packers, and got two autographs. We gave one to each of her youngest brothers. Later, when we visited her family, I saw one of the autographs sitting out. I asked where the other was. They both replied, “I don’t know.” I was ready to throw a fit. Didn’t they know what that autograph was worth. Didn’t it mean anything to them? Didn’t they know who signed that piece of paper? Were they out of their minds? How can someone disregard something so special?

Today we see all three persons of the Trinity autograph Baptism. We hear the Father speak, not with the terrifying thunder of Sinai, but with the friendly voice of grace, pointing us to His Son. We see the Holy Spirit descend as a dove, a symbol of peace, alighting upon the Peacemaker, anointing Him the Christ. We witness the Son, who needs no Baptism at all, submitting to a sinner’s Baptism as He takes our place in the dirty waters of the Jordan. And we watch St. John the Baptist, confused and awestruck, cognizant of His unworthiness for this task, attempting to deter this determined Savior. But Jesus has set His face on Calvary, and this is a giant step on that road. What a scene we have before us today! Will we disregard it?

A Highland minister once came to a house on the outskirts of his parish to baptize the child of an unsophisticated shepherd who lived there. “Are you prepared,” he asked. “Aye,” said the shepherd, “I got a grand ham for dinner.” “No, no,” said the minister, “I mean spiritually prepared?” “Aye, aye, minister. I got a quart jar from the inn!”

How often haven’t we, like that well-intentioned shepherd, confused Baptism with the pomp that surrounds it? We delay the Baptism of our children for the most trivial reasons: to wait a few months for family, to plan a proper party, or, even worse, because we simply aren’t motivated enough to arrange it. What a glaring indictment of our lack of understanding of this Sacrament. Who in their right mind, knowing that our Lord is in the water, wouldn’t throw their child to the Savior? Who would deprive their children or grandchildren of a connection to this day when the Father spoke, the Spirit descended, and the Son was revealed as the Christ.

On the Member Information Forms we distributed we requested information about your Baptism, namely, when and where it took place. Many of you have been unable to answer those questions. To be honest, until a few years ago, I couldn’t have answered those questions. I am reminded of Tricia’s little brothers. “Where is your autograph?” I was beside myself when Ahman Green’s autograph was missing. How much more should we be disturbed when we cannot remember when we met the heavenly Father Himself, when the Holy Spirit signed us with His seal of possession, when the victory of the Son was applied to us? Yet, somehow, it doesn’t trouble us all that often.

Where are your Baptismal certificates? Are they displayed like trophies for everyone to see? Are they buried in the attic? When was the last time you used your Baptism to chase away the devil and his temptations? Do you pray your Baptism, or have you laid this most powerful sword of supplication aside? If I told you that I had not bathed in twenty-seven years because I bathed once as a child you would think I was mad. How much more

should you think me mad for not returning to the gracious waters of my Baptism and bathing again in the grace the Father there bestowed upon me?

Christ chose Baptism to begin His ministry, repenting of sin that was not His own. The Father chose Baptism to speak His acceptance from heaven. The Holy Spirit chose Baptism to descend as a dove, a picture of God's peace. That is what Baptism is about: connection to Christ's saving work in our place, repentance, acceptance by the Father, and peace with God. It is not about gowns, pictures, parties, or invitations. The most important names on the guest list aren't Aunt Edith or Cousin Lovell, but the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, because they are the regulars at this grand salvific feat, beginning with their appearance in the Jordan.

Infant Baptism is the perfect picture of the grace that permeates our entire Christian lives. You did not ask to be baptized. You did not make a decision for God. You could not speak, let alone woo Him with promises. You could not walk, let alone stroll to the font. You were carried there. You were washed at the hands of another, acting in Christ's stead, according to Christ's divine call. You, innocent looking little bundle of sin that you were, had nothing to contribute, other than tears, as your Old Adam was drowned and a new person arose. God did the work. God bestowed the grace. God effected the conversion. You did nothing. The Word, joined to the water, did it all. And you are still that helpless infant at the font, completely dependent on the God who claimed you there.

Look at your neighbor's forehead. Can you see it there? Can you see Baptism? No, it is not visible to our eyes, but God sees it. He sees it and says, "Here is my baptized child, washed, scrubbed, renewed, and reborn. The world may see imperfection and shortcoming, but I see my child, sprinkled with the blood of the Lamb, dressed in all the glory of heaven." Tell that to the devil who tempts you. Tell that to the guilt that overwhelms you. Tell that to your God who has saved you, because telling Him what He has done for you is still the highest form of praise.

*"Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."* Isn't it weird how it works out this way? The text says *John consented*. Although he couldn't fully comprehend what was happening as he poured water on his Cousin's head, His Savior had spoken. Who was John to doubt the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the One to whom he'd spent his ministry pointing? He took His Savior at His word.

*"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned,"* our Savior declares. *"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit,"* Jesus warns. *"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,"* the Christ commands His Church. Like St. John the Baptist, who are we to doubt what our Savior has spoken. Let us take Him at His word.

*"Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness,"* our Savior said. *"Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness,"* the font calls out. You may have left your Baptism, but your Baptism has never left you. Today is a day of epiphany. Your God, Your Savior is in these waters. What are you waiting for? Jump in, get wet, and stay dripping with ever-new Baptismal mercy all the days of your life. Run to the Son who takes your place. Hear the Father's voice of acceptance. Welcome the Spirit who brings God's peace. This is a big deal, you know. If it weren't important, after all, why would the Christ be standing in the Jordan? Amen.