

“The Power of Ritual”

Matthew 3:13-17

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Rituals can be powerful forces when it comes to knowing who we are. Rituals tend to give us a sacred identity and a sacred purpose. Jesus is very tuned in to the power of ritual as he approaches John the Baptist asking to be baptized. This request strikes John the Baptist as odd, that it should be the other way around. But Jesus understands the importance of rituals that affirm who we are. Thus, he insists on proceeding with the baptism.

As Jesus emerges out of the waters, he hears his identity spoken aloud. “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Until then, he thought of himself as a carpenter’s son, a Hebrew man, a humble fellow with good questions. I imagine he had inklings about his sacred identity, hunches that God’s love might somehow be revealed through his words and deeds. But it is in the context of the baptism ritual that all of this is confirmed, made clear, and celebrated! I picture Jesus toweling off after the baptism, sitting on the riverbank with a smile on his face, thinking to himself, ‘so this is who I am, God’s son, the Beloved.’ I imagine him pondering this identity, wondering where it will take him. Wondering how this identity will change things.

Jesus spends the next forty days in the wilderness reflecting on what is implied by this identity, ‘God’s beloved.’

After those forty days, he returns with a life-giving clarity about who he is and what his mission shall be. He will be a Light to those living in the darkness. He will be as Living Water to those who thirst for righteousness. He will be the Bread of Life to all who hunger for meaning. He will be the Good Shepherd who tends to the wounds of all God's people.

So, I invite us this morning to reflect on the power of ritual to help us discern who we are and what we're called to be. When I lived among the Lakota people in South Dakota, I became aware of a ritual known as the Vision Quest. This sacred journey, often created for young adults but not exclusively so, is designed to enable individuals to wrestle with who they are and what it is God has in mind for them. After cleansing oneself in a sweat lodge, the vision quester heads out alone into the wilderness of the prairie or the wilderness of the Black Hills to pray for clarity. When clarity is found, the quester returns and is welcomed back into the community. His or her new sense of identity is celebrated.

Without calling it a Vision Quest, many of us perform similar rituals. We call them retreats. We call it hiking the Appalachian Trail. We call it walking the beach. We call it meditation. For most of us, there comes a time when we wonder 'who am I?' 'What does God expect of me now?' "What is my calling?" I suppose this is why I throw myself into Confirmation education. On Confirmation Day, we bless each student with a sacred identity, an identity that has emerged over the preceding nine months. I suppose this is why I throw myself into the preparation for a funeral or a wedding or any other sacred ritual. There is something mysteriously wonderful that is born in the context of ritual.

Matthew, our Gospel writer, could easily have omitted the story of Jesus' baptism. But he chooses to include this ritual story simply because the identity of Jesus matters. It mattered to Jesus himself. It mattered to the early church. It matters now. In modern language, we might say of Jesus, 'He's the real deal.'

What Matthew wants us to know is that we can trust his teachings. We can love as he loved. We can forgive as he forgave. We can pray as he prayed. We can be inclusive as he was inclusive. And we can follow him without hesitation. Matthew would have us have no doubt as to the identity of Jesus: Son of God; Beloved.

As we continue reading in Matthew's Gospel, we see the very first thing Jesus did was to call people to follow him. He called fishermen and farmers, tax collectors and carpenters, cooks and bakers, all ages, tongues, and races. He invited people to follow him. He invited people to see what a difference it would make if we truly lived into the commandment to love our neighbors, ALL our neighbors. He invited people to come and see what a difference it would make if we supported people in being the unique human beings God had made them to be. And those first followers became what we now call the church. They took on that new identity. They would be the church, the body of Christ in the world.

My vision for South Church in 2020 is that we would all support each other as we wrestle with these basic questions: Who am I? What does God have in mind for me now? When we take these questions to heart, clarity comes, miracles happen, and we find ourselves living in the greatest of hope. Amen.

