

“Identity Check”

Matthew 3:13-17

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As we begin a new year’s journey, I challenge you including myself to take pause for a moment and think about a spiritual question, “who are you” as a Christian or Christ-follower or you may identify yourself as a “seeker” in your spiritual quest. In other words, it is an “Identity Check” moment before we jump into new year’s challenges, race or whatever you name the new year of 2017!

I want to share a funny story. It was about the time a big-name politician was running for reelection and went to visit a nursing home for a photo op. He walked up to a lady in a wheel chair and tried to be polite, but found that he wasn’t being very successful at carrying on a conversation with her. Finally, in desperation he said, “Ma’am, do you know who I am?” She answered, “No sir, I don't know who you are—but if you go up to that desk they can tell you.” Sounds like that politician could use an identity check. Maybe he should have taken a moment to consider who he really was.¹

Let us shift the point of this story to our spiritual life. How will you express your spiritual identity to others? Let’s just imagine if you were called up and to stand before God and you were asked to explain your relationship with God, what would be your story? Please don’t get me wrong. I neither mean to test your faithfulness as Christian or the depth of spirituality nor your contribution to Church. I make a suggestion to each of you including me to take a spiritual check-in and reflection moment as we make a fresh beginning!

Some of you might wonder about today’s Scripture story and raise the question: Why does the Son of God, Jesus need to be baptized in the river? Our John the Baptist had a question. He was perplexed about Jesus’ request for baptism and said, “I am the one who needs to be baptized, *not you!*” But Jesus insisted. “Do it. God’s work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.” (The Message) So John did it. What is the point of Jesus’ baptism? What spiritual insights can we find and take for ourselves?

¹ An excerpt from Rev. Linda Loessberg-Zahl’s sermon, “Identity Check” (Feb. 10th, 2008) at Centennial United Methodist Church in Sacramento.

The simple answer is baptism. But it is never simple. It is a profound deep and committed beginning to be a Christian. Christ Jesus wanted to publicize and declare his determination and make public commitment as he began his ministry. Christian faith is never personal. It is a form of public and spiritual action. Do you remember your baptism? You should have made a new covenant with God as a Christ-follower in front of the congregation. Baptism is a powerful ritual, a ceremony and celebration as we Christians begin a new spiritual life in God. Let me share the story of Reverend John Buchanan's baby baptism:

The Reverend John Buchanan has just retired after 48 years as a Presbyterian pastor; and in an article recently, he was looking back over his half century of ministry. He remembered one Sunday service in which he was baptizing a two-year-old boy. After the child had been baptized with water, John Buchanan, following the directions of the Presbyterian prayer book, put his hand on the little boy's head and addressed him in Trinitarian language. He said, "You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever." Unexpectedly, the little boy looked up and responded, "Uh-Oh."²

Some of you might not remember the moment of your baptism. If you do not recall your personal moment of baptism, why don't you take today as your day of renewal and turn back to God for your spiritual rebirth. Replace your new years' resolution with an action of "faithful intentions".

In Christian faith, baptism is only once needed and we do not repeat it. No matter where you were baptized, your baptism is just once for all during your life time and faith journey! Why? Because it is a form of public action expressing your spiritual intention for a new beginning in Christ! At the 2008 General Conference, we Methodists expressed and confessed our understanding of baptism as follows:

We are saved by God's grace:
The Human Condition
The Divine Initiative of Grace
The Necessity of faith for Salvation

² An excerpt from Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long's sermon, "The Start of the Trail" June 3, 2012 http://day1.org/3823-the_start_of_the_trail Accessed Jan. 6th 2017

The means by which God's grace comes to us Baptism and the life of faith.

Baptism by water and the Holy Spirit

Baptism as incorporation into the body of Christ

Baptism as forgiveness of sin

Baptism as new life

Baptism and holy living

Baptism as God's gift to persons of any age

God's faithfulness to the baptismal covenant

Nurturing persons in the life of faith

Profession of Christian faith and confirmation

Reaffirmation of one's profession of Christian faith³

Simply speaking, to become Christian is to receive a new identity. The ritual of baptism is an expression of your holy and faithful intension. Others will not tell you who you are, instead Christ claims you. We accept and believe that the Holy Spirit works within us. We are born through water and the Spirit. In other words, baptism is the affirmation that God loves you and you are a child of God. A Christian is one who has "put on Christ" but it is not a yoke or burden on our lives. To put on Christ is to experience God's graceful liberation and new creation so that you make a fresh start for your life. And it is just the beginning, not the end of your faith journey. We Methodists believe two holy sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Communion). The word sacrament is the Latin translation of the Greek word *mysterion*. Baptism is God's mysterious work and personal and holy intervention! Please do not forget that we have joined God's *community*- God, the Spirit and Jesus Christ and be part of something bigger than ourselves. When Jesus received baptism from John the Baptist, a voice came from heaven saying, "This is my son, the Beloved". We become loving children of God through baptism. We also find God's hope, meaning and a life of purpose as we walk with Christ Jesus who will liberate us from the old world and help us build God's new world.

Therefore, remember your baptism and your identity in your hearts. You are a precious child of God! And God will never give up on you! May the blessings of God be yours as you make a bold step into a new year!

³ *By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism* <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/sacraments> Accessed Jan. 6th 2017