

“Birthmarked”

Family resemblances are an odd thing. As some of you know, I have a twin sister. This single fact fascinates people. Their eyes light up. They want to know whether my sister and I have a psychic connection. Whether we dressed alike in high school and fooled our teachers. Whether we can instinctively tell when the other person is sad or in trouble. Being a people pleaser, I hate to disappoint. But my sister and I look nothing alike. Okay. We have similar eyes and feet, but that’s not very exciting. The truth is, we look like siblings, which, genetically-speaking, we are. We’re not identical twins. But that has not prevented the following situation from happening again and again. When someone finds out that I have a twin sister, about two or three weeks later I will hear a report from that same person that he’s seen my sister. Like an Elvis sighting, my sister has even been seen in two places at once. Now, my sister lives in Des Moines. She could be, theoretically, at any of those places. But you see the flaw: the person reporting sightings of my sister assumes that she looks like me. Put it another way, I must have a doppelganger. Huh. Someday, I should put that to good use...

Family resemblances are an odd thing. The same nose, or hair color, or body shape instantly connects us to our family. We can look at faces from old family photographs taken decades ago of people we’ve never met and see in them our own faces and the faces of those we love. And yet the opposite is also true. In the same family, people not only look different but *are* different,

their personalities and interests varying so widely that it's a wonder that they come from the same gene pool. Every Christmas, my cousins have a (mostly) good-natured argument about which one of them is adopted. The truth is—none of them are. But every person's convinced that that she's the natural child and everybody else is the anomaly. Maybe *my* family is just strange. Maybe *your* family is completely normal. But I doubt it. It's almost too obvious to say this, but I will anyway. Families are where our identity and sense of belonging are formed. In healthy families, people are allowed to change and shift as the years go by. In too many families, people get stuck playing out the same roles over and over again. All of the Thanksgivings and Christmases start to blend together because the same conversations, the same dynamics happen over and over again. Set it to music and my family's Thanksgiving dinner could be a fully scripted opera.

Identity is a little like a birthmark. It can be stubborn to remove. It can look awkward. It can be easily confused with something else. But it's yours. It's yours.

Jesus is preparing to be marked himself, by John the Baptist, in our gospel text this morning. You'll recall that we're two weeks out from Christmas, which seems to me to be two months, instead of two weeks, ago. Last time we saw him, Jesus was a small child being visited by the wise men from the East. This week, he's fully grown, preparing to be baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist. John the Baptist has the reputation of being a Wild West kind of guy, like someone from "True Grit." He wears clothing made out of camel's hair; he eats locusts and

wild honey for food. In other words, he has all the marks of an Old Testament prophet, including a taste for fire and brimstone.

His work has already begun by the time Jesus arrives on the scene. John has been preaching repentance to the people of Jerusalem and Judea, calling for their confession of sin and baptism in the river Jordan. The crowds are flocking to the river—including the religious Pharisees and Sadducees—the favorite enemies of John the Baptist, and, not coincidentally, the gospel writer Matthew. John is none-to-pleased to see these religious folks. He takes their presence at the river to be insincere, if not hostile. “You brood of vipers!” he shouts at them. John warns these Pharisees and Sadducees, who will later become enemies of Jesus, that the confidence they place in their own righteousness is utterly misplaced. John baptizes with water, but the one who comes after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. So there! How d’ya like dem apples?!

This is Jesus’ cue to enter the scene, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. But it turns out that the one who will baptize has not been baptized himself. He would like to be marked by the waters of baptism like the crowds around him, but John disagrees.¹ John has already declared himself to be unworthy to even carry the sandals of Jesus, and now here is Jesus, standing in front of him, asking to be baptized right along with the unwashed masses of Jerusalem and Judea. It isn’t right. It isn’t proper. It isn’t seemly, if a man who eats locusts cares about such things. More to the point, it isn’t what John expects from Jesus, the son of David. For being such a young man himself, John’s self-identity is remarkably clear. He knows who he is: the guy whose task it is to prepare the way for Jesus the

Messiah. He's been doing his job, baptizing and preaching, so why is Jesus asking him to do something so odd?

The text doesn't tell us. Jesus says something about fulfilling all righteousness, which I interpret to mean: "I know this seems weird, but just go with me on this one."ⁱⁱ John isn't the first person to be surprised by the actions of this Messiah, and he won't be the last. Because already Jesus is asking the people he encounters to shift their perceptions...of him, to be sure, but also of themselves. Before Jesus came down to the river, John was so sure of who he was and what his message should be. And we haven't even gotten to the part about the heavens opening and the doves descending.

So John gives his consent to this baptismal plan, and then it really gets crazy. Jesus is lowered into the muddy water of the Jordan River and as he emerges, the heavens open to him and he sees the Spirit of God descending like a dove. And then, like something out of a Charlton Heston movie, a voice from heaven speaks: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." If John wasn't convinced that God was involved in his earthly work, the presence of doves and heavenly voices at this strange baptism probably does it. For his part, Jesus is silent. Maybe he, too, is a little freaked out at this heavenly display, or maybe he is just trying to take it all in. Either way, this baptism has marked him, even though the Messiah is in his DNA. Even though Father Abraham is in his family photo album. The next place Jesus goes will not be a royal court, but the desert. If the journey to the cross is what it means to be beloved by God, this might be a good time for Jesus to claim that *he* was adopted.

So, you see what's happening here. In one short piece of scripture, John the Baptist has handed over the reigns. And he's not sure what that means. And Jesus has gone from a peasant to the Messiah. After one dunk in a river.

Baptism is still what most Christians do, many, many years after Jesus was baptized by John in the River Jordan. We do it differently from each other. Not to trivialize profound theological convictions, but I tend to think the differences come down to infants or adults, sprinkling or dunking. As a guideline, Plymouth follows the infants/sprinkling path, although we believe it's never too late to be baptized! (If you're interested, please see one of the pastors after worship). Baptism has a way of calling attention to the primal blessedness of life. We baptize infants not to wash away original sin or as "fire insurance," as David likes to call it. We baptize infants because they are already blessed by God, and the waters of baptism signify and symbolize that we don't have to *earn* that blessing. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus had done very little before he was baptized by John. He had completed no miracles or healings, given no sermons on the mount or uttered any parables. His greatest accomplishment up to that point was being born, and I think Mary deserves most of the credit for that.

What about those of us who are far away from our own baptisms, in time and in memory? Baptism as a ritual that applies to us may have little meaning. Sure, it's fun to watch kids being baptized, to see if they cry, or squirm, or sleep through it all. But what does baptism have to do with us? If we were baptized, and I would guess that most of us here have been, it means that we were marked. This mark, this birthmark, if you

will, is invisible, but it's just as real as any birthmark. When we were baptized, we were called Beloved; we were claimed by God to be God's children first and foremost. You may not have caught that fact from the words that the pastor or priest said, or gathered that what that means is not only comforting but transforming.

Many of us learned in Sunday School that we are all children of God, and we end up spending the rest of our lives trying to be children of a considerably lesser god: the god who rewards good behavior and hard work, the god who tells us our identity is rooted in our accomplishments and successes. It starts early, right there in the heart of our families. As children, we look for roles to fill, and so we expend a great deal of energy and time trying to be the smart one or the pretty one, the rebellious child or the good son. It's an exhausting way to live, always trying to prove yourself or limit yourself or simply be something you're not. What everyone wants, I'm convinced, is to be called Beloved and for that to be enough, for now and for always.

That's what baptism means: to be called Beloved, and then to live into it. To be named and claimed by God for the living out of God's Spirit within you and through you. Nobody else can live your life or tell you who are. You have been marked. More than that: you've been birthmarked for a life that is rooted in the truth of God's love. If you live into that love, the world will not mistake you for somebody else; you'll be exactly who God intended you to be. God's protecting grace will hold you and embracing love enfold you. Amen.

ⁱ Matthew is the only gospel that includes this exchange between John and Jesus. Scholars speculate that followers of John were still around when Matthew was written, and therefore, the succession of Jesus after John needed to be firmly established. In any case, the baptism of a superior (Jesus) by an inferior (John) would have required explanation.

ⁱⁱ Troy A. Miller points out that “righteousness” here has less to do with John’s standing before God and more to do with John’s obedience to God. In other words, the baptism is an act of discipleship. From *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), p. 239.