

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord – January 10, 2016

Why would Jesus need to be baptized? It's an unsettling question, isn't it? After all, if anything, shouldn't Jesus be doing the baptizing?

One possible answer is that Jesus decided to enter even more deeply into the human condition. Though sinless himself, Jesus was taking sides with us at his baptism. God stood in line with us.

Theologians often speak of Jesus as "taking on" the sins of humanity. Perhaps Jesus' sense of sin can be compared to the shame that parents might feel if their child were guilty of criminal behavior. There is no sin on the parents' part, but they often feel the weight of the suffering that was caused by their child. If this is true, and I believe it is, then no one was in greater need of baptism than Jesus, because of his "taking on" our sins.

I remember being taught about baptism by Sister Rose as a boy. All of us are born carrying original sin, even babies, so baptism was necessary to remove our sin. Even then, I couldn't fathom how babies could be sinful. But now I can admit that original sin makes sense to me, thanks to decades of meditating on my own flawed humanity. No matter how often I pray, how many retreats I make, or how hard I try, it still sin. I bump up against sin daily. This is not to say that I am a serial killer, a notorious sinner, or even an especially mean person. Rather, I'm aware of my sinfulness because like everyone else, I sin. So I can say with the psalmist: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." And I continually speak with others who also bump up against their own sinfulness. Pope Francis is with us on this. When asked who he was, he answered, "I am a sinner." As the old saying goes, original sin is the one verifiable Christian dogma. We see it every day.

But there is more to Jesus' baptism and our own baptisms, than this. There's the opening of the heavens, the dove-like descent of the Spirit, and the voice from on high. And we begin to sense here a call, a call to holiness. For Jesus, it was a call to remember David, Abraham and Isaac, and Isaiah as he begins his public ministry. "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased."

For us, our baptism is a call to holiness. It's a universal call, open to all without exception. Baptism for us is the foundational sacrament. We build on it all our lives.

Baptism is not a sacrament of sleep or a ritual of forgetting. It is a wake-up call to pursue holiness of life. We, too, are God's beloved. Perhaps it takes some time for us to "get it." That's all right. To focus on God, on grace, on forgiveness, on mercy is our call. To be the living expression of God's mercy and God's expansiveness is the work of a lifetime. What we are given in time is a bunch of dots to connect us with eternity.