

Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. It is the day commemorating the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. So, of course, we will talk about baptism today. Well, let me be upfront here. I am water phobic. I drink water. The only time I put myself "alone" in the water is when I take a shower 😊

When I moved to Hawaii, surrounded by water, several people at Kona United Methodist Church felt they needed to help me overcome my fear of water. They created a swim/snorkeling ministry to take me to the water. One of those passionate about this ministry was Kim Davison, who was and still is dear to my heart. She geared me up and led me to the seashore. She put herself in the water first and said, "Come on in; the water's fine!"

In today's scripture, John stood in the Jordan River waters and shouted, "Come on in; the water's fine." And some joined him, and others stood on the shore. He had a word or two for those on the shore, but that is a different passage. Today, we look at one who took him up on the invitation and joined him in the waters—Jesus.

When Jesus went down the bank into the river, John was shocked that Jesus had taken up his invitation. Have you ever sent out an open invitation and were shocked that unlikely persons who would accept the invitation showed up at your doors? That's what happened at the Jordan River for John.

John's understanding of baptism is about the baptism of repentance, of forgiveness of sins, as he preached about this baptism he was offering. According to his understanding, Jesus did not need to have sins forgiven because Jesus had no sin.

How did John respond to this unexpected situation? He said to Jesus in verse 14 of today's scripture, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matthew 3:14). Simply, he was saying, "What are you doing here?" To this, Jesus responded by saying, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). Let it be so for now? What does that mean? And what is this righteousness that Jesus is trying to fulfill? The truth is, we don't really know what this means because the Bible does not say anything about it. Without any description or explanation, John consented to offer Jesus this baptism, the baptism of repentance and forgiveness.

Since the Bible does not provide any explanation or meaning, I am guessing that maybe Jesus' view of what was happening was larger than what John thought of this baptism. Perhaps John, and most of us, think of repentance as *turning away*. When we repent, we turn away from our sins and turn away from our life of sin. We are sorry for what had gone on before. We are sorry for what we have done before and are pledging not to engage in those behaviors again. That is how we understand repentance, right? *Turning away!*

But what if Jesus understood repentance to be a *turning toward* instead of *turning away*? What if the gesture that Jesus made was one of inclusion, acceptance, entrance, or new beginnings? Jesus' baptism was a beginning moment for the ministry that Jesus would perform. Jesus' baptism was a sign that something new was about to be launched. And this new thing was nothing less than the "kin-dom" of God, nothing less than a new way of living in a community.

What we have done is done. What we have not done is undone. Nothing much we can do about our past. But we can do something about the life of the present and of the future. Maybe Jesus' baptism is more about the life of the present and the future than the life of the past.

Righteousness Jesus talked about fulfilling in His baptism refers to being faithful to relationships in the life of the present and of the future. We cannot be righteous all by ourselves. We are righteous with God and righteous with one another. Righteousness implies a relationship. The necessary requirement for baptism in The United Methodist Church is the community. A baptism is a corporate act. Baptism is almost always done as a part of worship. And when in extreme cases, it is not a part of a regular worship service, then the community must be represented.

United Methodists teach that baptism initiates people into the faith community and into a covenant relationship with God and God's people. Baptism is an entrance into the fellowship of believers. Baptism is a joining up with the body of Jesus Christ. Through baptism, we are *turning toward* God and being called to be the children of God, whom God loves and is well pleased with. Joy is the evidence of true baptism because of our relationship with God and one another. Once we have been baptized, we are never alone. There is always a family around us. That is good news for us.

Do you feel alone as you begin the year 2023? If so, "Come on in; the water's fine." Do you feel like you have no way to start a new life because of what you have done in the past or what you have not done in the past? Then, "Come on in; the water's fine." If you are not joyful for some reason, then "Come on in; the water's fine."

May we all who have been baptized remember that we are baptized. May you all who are not yet baptized remember that God loves you. "Come on in; the water's fine." Amen.