

**Clackamas United Church of Christ**  
**Rev. Adam Ericksen**  
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## **Baptism is not about sin, it's about love**

When I was 30, I was just beginning my ministry as a youth pastor.

During my first year, I had a few amazing high schoolers in the youth group. They were engaged and asked good questions about faith and doubt and the existence of God and if the Bible was more harmful or helpful and about our ethical responsibility towards one another.

I remember going up to one of the dad's of the group. I told him that his daughter was one of our important leaders. She was compassionate, listened well, had insightful things to say, and was aware of events happening throughout the world. She was mature beyond her years.

Her father said to me, "Yes, she's great because she knows who she is."

And I have to tell you that at that moment I was very jealous.

Because I was 30 years old and I knew that I hadn't figured out who I was yet. And I knew it was important to know who I was because all of those self-help books told me it was important. But even people in the ancient world said it was important. (click) For example, in Greece, there was a Temple in Delphi dedicated to the god Apollo. At the entrance to the temple was an inscription (click) with a creepy looking guy that said, "Know Thyself." While in the ancient world, they put that phrase on the entrance of the temple, in the modern world, we've put it on a t-shirt. (click) But we kept the creepy looking guy. We've advanced so far.

But I mean, all this pressure to know who I am has the unfortunate side effect of making me think that I don't know who I am and so I constantly have to buy the self-help books to finally figure myself out.

And here was a 16-year-old girl who already it all figured out!

But seriously, knowing who you are can be tough. (Click) I mean, we live in a world that bombards us with different messages about who we are and more often than not those messages are negative. They are about how we don't stack up. The message from our consumer culture tends to be that there is something deficient about you and you will be made whole if you only purchase what they are trying to sell.

But it goes beyond our consumer culture. Have you ever felt like you didn't live up to the expectations of a spouse or a boss or your parents or maybe your in-laws? That no

matter what you did or how hard you tried, your sense of self felt diminished because you couldn't meet their expectations.

I'm here to tell you that you are not alone.

And I'm also here to tell you that it's not really about you. It's entirely about them and their issues. The only aspect of that dynamic that is about you is to know that it isn't really about you. It's about their own failures and insecurities that they don't know how to deal with and so they project them onto you.

Some years of therapy have helped me with this...

And the good news is that from a spiritual point of view, the heroes of every religion seem to have to go through this process of not meeting the expectations that others have of them. And in the process coming to know themselves at their deepest level.

Take Jesus, for example. Throughout the Gospels, we find that people constantly make demands upon Jesus. Crowds often demand that Jesus feed them or heal them. Others demand that Jesus prove himself to them. Even his disciples attempt to push him to be the violent Messiah who would destroy their enemies, as opposed to the nonviolent Messiah who called them to love their enemies.

I'm sure that all of those expectations that surrounded Jesus led him to have doubts about his sense of self. And that's why our story today about baptism is so important.

Baptism is one of those Christian rituals that has a lot of religious baggage. I've talked with quite a few of you about being in the process of unlearning a lot of the harmful religious teachings that many of us have grown up with. And there's quite a bit to unlearn when it comes to Baptism.

In some traditions, the whole reason that we need baptism goes like this: from the time you are born you are a sinner. You are separated from God at birth because you are stained by sin. The claim is that at the core of the human identity we are sinners from birth. And so if you don't get baptized, you are going to hell and will be separated from God for eternity.

I want to be very clear about this: that teaching about baptism is false. And it's false because it has the wrong starting point.

Let me explain it this way: Jesus' baptism has confused many Christians throughout our history. The question is this, If Jesus is sinless, and the whole purpose of baptism is to wash away our sins, then why did Jesus need to be baptized?

People have found all kinds of strange ways to answer this question, not realizing that the real problem is the starting point. Baptism isn't to wash away our sins. Baptism is to drench us in the truth about ourselves.

And the truth about ourselves is the same truth about Jesus. God didn't come to Jesus at his baptism to wash away his sins. God came to Jesus to say these words, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

The great spiritual teaching of the 20th century, Henri Nouwen, claimed in his book "Life of the Beloved," that what God said to Jesus at his baptism, God also says to us. God says what has always already been true about us. God says to us at our baptism, and indeed throughout our lives, that you are God's beloved child, with whom God is well pleased.

Now, I don't want you to hear me saying that there is no such thing as sin. In the original Greek language, sin is the word "hamartia" and it simply means "to miss the mark." Hamartia comes archery - if you shoot your arrow and you miss the bull's eye, you've missed the mark. And so you get up and you try again.

So yes, there are many times when I have "hamartiad," when I have missed the mark, when I have sinned. But that does not define who I am. And it doesn't define who you are because you are a child of God who is drenched in the waters of God's love.

But the reality is that we live in a world that is dysfunctional. In one way or another, it tells us the lie that we are not loved. Sometimes that dysfunction affects our families, or our workplace, or even our church. And sometimes we take that dysfunction into ourselves and believe that the lie is true. And so sometimes we have to have someone come to us and remind us of who we are are the core of our identity.

One of my favorite examples of this is from a movie called "Blood Diamond." Have any of you seen Blood Diamond? If you haven't seen it and you don't want me to spoil it, that's just too bad. But it came out in 2006, so you've had some time.

The movie takes place in an African village of Sierra Leone during that country's civil war in 1999. Rebel soldiers entered villages, killed many of the adults and kidnapped the boys to turn them into violent rebel child soldiers.

The movie follows a father and son who went through this trauma. Rebel soldiers kidnapped a boy from a village and brainwashed him into thinking he was a bad boy who was a violent killing machine. They taught him to shoot guns and kill people. The boy is corrupted into a mean, violent, killer.

The father survives the attack and goes on a mission to find his boy and bring him home, but the longer it takes him to find his son, the more corrupt the rebel soldiers make his son.

At the end of the movie the father, and Leonardo DiCaprio, at last meet his son. But his son points a gun directly at him and this is what happens....

That scene just amazes me. Like baptism, the boy is given back his identity. “You are a good boy,” “Your mother loves you so much,” “You like soccer,” “I know they made you do bad things, but you are not a bad boy. I am your father, who loves you. And you will come home with me and be my son again.” It’s beautiful.

Because sometimes we get the message that we are worthless. Or that our value is only held in what we can produce or what we can offer. Or that you are defined by the worst thing that you have ever done.

And so sometimes we need others to tell us the Gospel message, which is the truth about who you are at our core. Like the boy in Blood Diamond needed to hear those words from his father to come back to his true self, maybe some of us here today need to hear these gracious words from God that come to us through the baptismal story: no matter what you have done and no what you have left undone, you are loved forever as God’s beloved child.

That is the fundamental truth about you. Thanks be to God. Amen.