



January 8, 2012
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You Belong to God!

Mark 1: 4-13

Every two or three years I lead a group to Israel, and the renewal of baptisms in the Jordan River is always a very powerful moment. A high point for me was when I baptized my own kids. These are pictures of Cooper in 2008 getting ready to get dunked in some very cold water. *[Series of photos]* My favorite picture is the one where he is mulling what he's about to do. Don't you love the yellow Crocs?

It is our tradition at Chapel Hill to begin the New Year with a renewal of our own baptismal vows. For our text this morning, I've chosen the baptismal story of Jesus.

For thirty years Jesus remained in his hometown of Nazareth... running a carpentry shop, caring for his family. But finally the time came to begin the final phase of his ministry. Jesus left Nazareth, walked about 80 miles to the Jordan River near Jerusalem and found his cousin John, known as "The Baptist." Have you ever wondered why Jesus submitted to baptism? If baptism represents repentance and the washing away of sin—and if Jesus was sinless—why did He need to be baptized? John wondered the same thing. In Matthew's gospel, John protests that Jesus ought to be baptizing Him, not the other way around. But Jesus insisted. Why? Some theologians say that it was to identify with humankind, the ones he had come to save. Others say that it represented the perfect fulfillment of all of God's righteous requirements.

There's another possibility—one that I find very powerful: baptism, for Jesus, represented a complete surrender to his Father's will. Baptism is not something that you can do for yourself. Even in today's individualistic, pick-from-the-menu Christian culture, you don't read of someone baptizing himself. Baptism belongs to the Church. Only the Church can offer it on behalf of Jesus. And only those who belong to the church—who surrender willingly or who are surrendered by their parents—can receive it. There are horrible accounts in history of involuntary baptisms. Jews and pagans were forced to be baptized; forced to become "Christians."

Can you imagine dragging someone up here against their will, forcing them to their knees, forcing them at sword point to say the right words? Ghastly, isn't it? And pointless! For baptism to mean anything it cannot be coerced. It must be received. It is the offering up of your child. The bending of your head. The bowing

of your heart. The receiving of a sacrament that represents the gift of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is an act of surrender to the Lord and into His body, the Church.

When Jesus was baptized in front of the crowd gathered on the Jordan riverbank, it was his way of declaring to God, "I know what you have sent me to do. I know my time has come. I know that my call will cost me everything, including my life. And in this act of baptism I surrender all that I am and all that I have to you, my Heavenly Father."

So...was His offering accepted? How do we know? A sign and a voice. What was the sign? Heaven was torn open! And the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove as he came out of the waters. It was a sign for all the witnesses...and for Jesus, too... that his ministry would be inspired and empowered by the very Spirit of God. And there was also a voice. Whose voice? The Father's. There are only two times in the synoptic gospels...Matthew, Mark and Luke...that God the Father speaks audibly. When? At Jesus' baptism. And on the Mount of Transfiguration. When Jesus began his ministry. And just before Jesus headed to Jerusalem to conclude his ministry by dying on a cross.

Only two times...and both times God said virtually the same thing. What does God speak? A blessing! A blessing upon his son. Both times. "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Notice the three basic elements of blessing: "You are my Son. I love You. I am proud of You." You belong to me! I love you. I am proud of you. I have taught on this principal many times, especially with men. There is nothing more powerful in a child's life than to hear these words of blessing from their father. Every man ought to speak them every day into the life of his kids. You belong to me. I love you. I am proud of you.

And don't give me any of that bologna about how you show your love with your actions... and that is good enough. If God the Father thought His Son Jesus needed to hear words of blessing aloud, why would we think our children don't need the same thing? And not just our kids. Can you imagine the power of those words if we spoke them into our marriages? Into our friends? Into our fellow church members. Into our co-workers. Who doesn't need to know that they belong, that they are loved and that they are honored? Who doesn't need blessing?

This morning I want to zero in on those first words: "You are my Son." When Jesus submitted to the waters of baptism, it was an act of surrender to the Father for the sake of the World. And the very first words God spoke back to Jesus acknowledged that. "You **are** my Son. You are **my** Son. **You** are my Son." However you emphasize it, God was agreeing with Jesus. "You belong to me!" Such a gracious blessing of a sovereign God. "You belong to me!" Who doesn't long to hear those words? "You belong to me! You are mine!"

Who doesn't long to belong. It is one of the most powerful aspects of church membership...the sense of belonging! Of being a part of something greater than ourselves. It is the reason that we only baptize into membership—because baptism signifies belonging—to Christ and to Christ's family the Church. When our parents surrender us to baptism...when we surrender ourselves to baptism—whether a sprinkle on the head or a dunk in the river—that moment of surrender is a chance for God to repeat the same words of blessing to his children. "**You** are my Son. **You** are my daughter. **You** belong to me!"

When we go to Israel, I have a particular place that I like for the renewal of baptisms. Here's one more picture from 2008. Now, I want you to watch some video of our baptisms in the same place last November. This is Kay, a friend from France. She accepted Christ in Israel and was baptized for the first time. Watch and see if you notice anything different between the two baptisms?

Do you see how much higher we are standing in the water last year? So much gravel had washed down the river that it raised the bottom of the riverbed by a foot, which completely changed the baptisms. Normally, baptism looks like this: a person stands in water up to here (hip level), the pastor tips them backward, pronounces the words, and dunks them underneath.

But with the rise in the riverbed, it wasn't deep enough to do that. That meant that everyone had to kneel down and be bent backwards like this-pretzel fashion. *[Demonstrate]* As you can imagine, it was a little more difficult for some of my less flexible baptisands. In fact, there were a few who, no matter how I pushed down, I never did get them completely under the water. It's a good thing that we don't think the amount of water matters as Presbyterians. Otherwise, there are some inflexible people in this church who are only half-baptized.

But historically, some people used this idea to their advantage. In the time of the Crusaders, when knights were baptized, they did it this way: while holding their sword arm up out of the water. In other words, they were saying, "I will surrender everything to Christ—except for this arm. I am not willing to surrender to Christ what I intend to do with this arm." In other words they were saying to God, "I surrender all, except for this part of me. This does not belong to you."

Is that possible? Is it possible to dictate to God the terms under which we will follow Him? To tell Him how much of ourselves we will give? To hold part back? To remain sovereign over some part of our life? Is it possible to be inflexible Christians who only baptize what we want baptized? Well...we try it all the time, don't we? We speak the words of Lordship, we surrender to baptism, but there is something we hold above the water.

What are you holding above your baptismal waters? How about this? Your wallet. Your money. Malachi teaches clearly that the first ten percent of everything we make belongs to God. Jesus confirms that teaching in the New Testament... and

then takes it further. Every penny we have belongs to God. If every member of this congregation baptized their wallets...we would never have a financial challenge again. Debt would be paid off, missions fully funded, every person in need fully cared for. There would be no shortfall, no budget-hacking, no staff cuts. Even in a recession. But hundreds of us were baptized this way—wallet up. God says, “Your money belongs to me.” And you say, “No, it is mine.”

Or maybe it is your wedding band that you hold above the baptismal waters. You know your marriage is not what God intends. It is certainly not what you dreamed of. But every time you receive an offer of help from your church—like an incredible Couples’ Life Conference—every time you have the chance to do something that could make a lifetime difference in the most important relationship in your life, you do this. [*Hold ring hand up*] God says, “Your marriage belongs to me.” And you say, “No, it is mine.”

Is it your business practices that you hold above the water. Or your kid’s sports. Or your schedule. Or your internet use? God says, “Your business, your kids’ activities, your priorities, your addictions—they all belong to me.” And you say, “No, this part is mine.”

Abraham Kuyper was a Dutch pastor who became the Prime Minister of the Netherlands in 1901. He was also a renowned theologian. Kuyper once wrote, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, “Mine!”

In your baptism, God cried, “Mine! You belong to me.” Is there any part of your life that you continue to hold above the waters declaring, “No, this part is mine.” In a moment, we are going to renew our baptismal vows. If you have been baptized, you are invited to come forward—when you are ready—to receive the sign of the cross on your forehead. But to prepare, I’d like you to do something. Ladies, open your purses. Men, open your wallets or dig into your pockets. Find something that symbolizes what you hold above the waters. Your wallet. Your business card. Your iPhone. Your calendar. I would invite you to hold that in your hands as you come forward; to use this moment as a chance to recommit all of your life to Christ. So that you might hear those words from your Father, “You belong to me.” As you receive the water, you will hear the words, “You belong to Christ.” Let your response be, “I belong.”

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **DIG DEEPER**

1. What are the three elements of the blessing as found in our text? Pastor Mark spoke of the power of blessing, especially in the lives of our children and grandchildren. Were you blessed as a child? Are you a good "blesser?"
2. The first element of the blessing is God's affirmation that we belong to Him. What does that mean to you?
3. How did Pastor Mark illustrate the way we hold back some part of our life from God? Of what would you tell God, "No...this part belongs to me?" What would it mean to commit that aspect of your life to God's sovereignty?