

1st Sunday after Epiphany (Baptism of the Lord)

January 12, 2025

Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church

Baptism is the Cure for an Identity Crisis

Titus 3:4-7 (EHV)

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, ⁵he saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Christmas is officially over, and we are now in the season of Epiphany. The theme for the Sundays in Epiphany is “Epiphany Moments.” We all have little epiphany moments in our lives. This is a moment when we get it, when it clicks for us, when the lightbulb finally goes on. Maybe it was something in school. Reading became fun instead of a chore. The math finally started to make sense. Perhaps it was athletic. Something you had to think through every step eventually became second nature, and you did it with ease.

We are going to look at some “aha” moments in the next weeks that are more important than sports and even more important than reading and math. These Epiphany moments start with what the season of Epiphany is all about. Jesus Christ, the man, is revealed to be the true Son of God. We just finished celebrating the other side of the identity of Christ as we celebrated the Son of God becoming true man. As the Holy Spirit continues to reveal the identity of Jesus to us through the Scriptures, he will also reveal truths about us. We begin with our identity.

If you are meeting someone for the first time, what might they ask about you to find out who you are? Your name should probably be mentioned. They might ask what you do for work or what school you attend or where you live. Family and friends will often come up as we try to make connections. They might ask about hobbies, favorite sports teams, and maybe even what church you attend. All of these things are part of our identity but most of these things can change. Someone could enter the witness protection program and suddenly all of these parts of their identity have changed.

In order to know our identity that does not change, our true identity, we first look at the true identity of Jesus. To many he is the son of Mary and Joseph. He has the potential to be a great teacher. But he looks like any other Jewish man of his time. Jesus might know the Scriptures better than most but there have been great experts in the law before him. But then Jesus steps into the Jordan River and his true identity is revealed. The Holy Spirit had not descended in the form of a dove on the others whom John baptized. God the Father had not spoken from heaven when John baptized other people. Only for Jesus.

At his baptism, Jesus is revealed to be the true Son of God when his Father declares, “you are my Son.” He is revealed to be united with the Father and the Holy Spirit as the one, true God. This man is revealed to be the one who is loved by God. God the Father is well pleased with Jesus. This is not just another prophet like John the Baptist. This is the one and only Son of God, the holy and perfect One, who does everything right so as to be well pleasing to his Father in heaven. This has been the identity of the Son of God from eternity. There was never a time when he did not exist or was not the perfect and holy Son of God. His baptism is just one of the Epiphany moments in which his true and eternal identity is revealed.

It was at our baptism that our true and lasting identity was given. Notice that I did not say our true identity was revealed in our baptism. That is only true of Christ. For our identity before baptism was that we were born in the image of sinful Adam. We were totally corrupt, rebellious,

enemies of God. We were slaves to sin, our father was the devil, and we were heirs of eternal death. Listen again to Paul describe the identity God gives us through baptism:

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, ⁵he saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life.

Our identity is now found in the kindness and love of God, in his mercy, in his salvation, in his washing, in his justification, in his grace. Our identity is found in our Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit and what he has done for us, who he has made us. Let's dig into this new identity as the Holy Spirit reveals what this new identity means for us.

First, our identity is not found in our righteous works that we did for ourselves but is found in God's mercy. As believers in Christ, the children of God, we want to do righteous works. God calls on us to do righteous works. This can lead to a believer looking for his or her identity in the good things they do in life. A person could look at what they gave to charity last year and feel pretty certain about their identity as a child of God because of the amount they gave. A believer could get their certainty of being a child of God by being super involved with their children's school and activities, by being the most helpful neighbor on the block. All these are good things, but these righteous works do not save us. Such good things do not give us our identity. And when we start looking for righteous works to give us identity, we are in danger.

For we will either think we've done enough or think we haven't. If we think we've done enough righteous works to prove that we are a child of God, then our faith turns from God to ourselves. On the other hand, and possibly the most common, is to think we haven't done enough. There is always the parent who is more involved, the neighbor who is more helpful, the person who gives more to charity. And we could have done more but didn't. Slowly, doubt begins to creep in. Have I done enough to keep my identity as a child of God? Maybe I don't really believe like I should. Maybe I'm not really a child of God but have just been pretending. And despair sets in.

The good news is that our identity is not found in our righteous works but in God's mercy. He saved us because of his mercy, not because of the good we had done or would do. Your identity is secure in God's mercy and grace. God adopted you as his child in baptism. Trust him on this. You are his child.

Paul describes baptism beautifully when he writes:

He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit

This is another truth about our identity. It is not found in our sins but in our washing. We often confess that we are sinful, that we are sinners. Of course, this is true. But this is not our lasting identity. This is not how the God of grace and mercy sees those who have been baptized. For he washed our sins away when we were born again of water and the Spirit. No, the Holy Spirit did not descend upon us in the form of a dove when we were baptized, but he did wash us. Christ, who did everything pleasing to his Father, atoned for our sins by his own holy, precious blood upon the cross. As water was applied to us in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit also washed our sins away with the blood of Christ. His blood was applied to our sins and there is no condemnation for those who are baptized into Christ.

Our sinful nature still clings to us in this life, but its days are numbered. Our lasting identity is washed, cleansed, justified and forgiven. The Father loves his Son, Jesus Christ. Through baptism, he also loves you. The Father is well pleased with all that his Son had done and would do. Through baptism, your Father in heaven is well pleased with you. As the Spirit renews us day by day in this baptismal grace, let us live in line with our lasting identity of forgiven children of God.

Paul concludes with these amazing words about what baptism means for us.

Having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life.

Our identity does not depend on the current or past circumstances of our life. Don't let what happens to you in life define you. Don't let what you've done, good or bad, define you. In baptism, God gives you your identity. You have been declared to be not guilty of sin. You have been adopted as an heir of eternal life. When someone is in a dark place in life, turn on the light of this Epiphany moment. There is hope, certain hope of a perfect life that will never end. The Son of God won this for you and the Holy Spirit has brought you into this promise through baptism.

Amen.