

Finding a Faith that Fits

Matthew 3: 13-17

by Rev. Teresa K. McRoberts

West Richmond Church of the Brethren

January 3, 2021

As is fitting for a new year, I want to take us back to basics for a moment this morning.

To get back to basics, I want you to imagine your softest, well-broken in, beloved pair of blue jeans. I want you to think of the comfort of your favorite jeans, how you don't mind wearing them over and over again and how well they fit. How soft they feel

This morning I want to use the durability, comfort and fit of blue jeans as a metaphor for our faith lives--what I call finding a faith that fits.

Why blue jeans?

Because the call to Christian life is about the basics.

Finding a faith that fits is not like renting a tuxedo for the special event or having an evening gown that you take out every now and then and put on when you want to look good.

Having a faith that fits is more like finding that perfect pair of jeans that you can work and play in, that you can wear not only all day but all year long—for many years.

In about 1976 my older brother had a pair of Levi Jeans like this --

He wore them for at least three years—no small task when you are a growing boy. I believe he wore them in the 8th, 9th, and 10th grades because he is two years older than I am and I scooped up those jeans in when I was in 8th grade.

My mother loathed the jeans.

First they became somewhat faded,
then a little thin at the knees.
When the holes appeared she threatened to hide them.

But my brother loved them . . . he liked the way they felt and he liked the way the fit.
And so did I.

When my brother finally out grew those jeans, I started wearing them.

My favorite thing about those jeans was that they were soft—well-prepared by having been washed hundreds of times.

In that time before prewashed jeans had become a thing, I had a nice fitting, comfortable pair of prewashed jeans in which to begin my teenage years.

It simply would not have been the same—nor would it have been satisfactory—if my mother had gone out at the beginning of school and purchased me a pair of dark, crunchy, stiff jeans that did not conform to my body.

The fact that those jeans were prewashed made all the difference in their fit and comfort—and to this day, I love to take over an old shirt or pair of jeans that someone (now it's usually my husband) has broken in.

In fact the boots I have on today were purchased and broken in by my sister in law. I visited her in Texas a few years ago. We kept planning to go shopping for boots. When it was time to go out on the town, we had not been boot shopping, she let me borrow them to go out—apparently my standard Danskos just wouldn't do.

The broken in boots fit well!

They were so comfortable I offered to buy them from her.

The challenge for us ***as people who call ourselves Christians*** —is to be as comfortable in our faith life as we are in the broken in boots or jeans that we love.

This is a tricky concept—"comfortable in our faith life."

- It is tricky because we may already be pretty comfortable in our economic and secular lives.
- It's tricky because there is a common notion that when we "get comfortable" we stop growing. That is not the kind of comfort I am talking about

Perhaps you have already heard or learned along the way that Jesus came to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.

And it's true

The gospel story is full of incidents and encounters with Jesus where those who were most like us in first century Palestine—educated, sophisticated, church-going, God-fearing, comfortable people—were criticized and called down by Jesus.

And since that's the case—then we need to ask what does it mean to find a faith that fits?
What does it mean to find a faith that fits?

I had two grandparents growing up.

- One was my father's mother—Fuquay-Varina, little 2 bedroom house at the intersection of hwy 55 and 401 on Broad street—just across from the RR tracks.

We spent every vacation there—Christmas break, Easter break and if we moved during the summer—a week or two there. It was come as you are—jeans, shorts, bare feet and all.

- My other grandparent—my mother's father—lived in Raleigh—less than 20 miles up the road from F-V—but we did not stay with him—in fact, when we did go see him, we dressed up.

I recall being very excited in the 3rd, 4th and 5th grades to see what kind of “evening gown” Santa would bring me so I could wear it out to dinner with my grandfather and all my cousins ---at the K & W cafeteria.

I believe finding a faith that fits means

- knowing that you are accepted by God for who you are—just as you are—without having to dress up your soul or pretty up your feelings
- feeling comfortable enough with God to take up residence with him—not just visit.

This permanency—and the comfort permanency requires—is what Jesus was talking about in John's gospel chapter 15 when he said:

“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me.”

Maybe you know this passage:

“I am the vine, you are the branches;
he who abides in Me and I in him,
he bears much fruit,
for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

What does it take for us to live lives of faith for the long haul—not just visiting—but abiding in Jesus?

First— the good news—

most of us have already received one of the most basic gifts that makes this abiding possible—Baptism.

Do you ever stop to consider what your Baptism means?

In one sense you know what it means—the cleansing waters of baptism are a symbolic washing away of our sins.

But our baptism is so much more!!

One year I spent the first week of the New Year in South Florida hanging dry wall and building scaffolding alongside nine college age young adults.

Together we worked for Habitat for Humanity-- Monday through Friday—hanging gypsum board on the walls and ceilings of one house; and building scaffolding around two other houses so that the team that came in behind us could raise the roof on those houses.

The team of veteran mission trip workers was incredible—

- not only because of their experience and their willingness to serve—
- but they were work horses—applying themselves full force to the work—and I do mean work—at hand. I was sore for a week after I got home.

Even the Habitat organization that we worked with was astounded by the team’s work ethic and their joy.

On more than one occasion I heard someone ask one of our team:

“What makes you want to give up part of your winter break, your free time, and your money to do this work?”

Their answers varied—

One said

“This is fun. We do this every summer and spring break,
and every chance we get”

Another said:

“We know we are making a difference in the lives of the people
whose homes we help to build”

I heard another one say:

“When we serve others we are serving God”

And still another noted:

“On trips like these doing work like this,
we see God at work”

Seeing God—through a mission experience or in serving God in the world-- is particularly apropos to this season of the church we call Epiphany.

The word “Epiphany” comes from the Greek and means

- manifestation or striking appearance;
- a shining forth or revelation”

Even before Christ, **an** epiphany referred to an appearance of a god to mortals.

The Epiphany—a festival or feast day of the Christian Church—which we celebrate today-- is one of the most important festivals of the liturgical year.

It ranks up there with Christmas and Easter!

Like those two seasons, Epiphany shows us how God comes to or is made manifest to God’s people.

Connected to Epiphany is the observance of Jesus' baptism at the hands of John the Baptist—the event described in our scripture for today.

Matthew writes:

“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said,

“This is my Son, whom I love;
with him I am well pleased.”

In this passage, Jesus is **revealed** to be God’s beloved son as we hear the voice from the heavens and see the appearance of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove.

Talk about an Epiphany!!!

The heavens are torn apart and **God in Jesus is revealed!**

Like the college students observed, we can have the privilege of an Epiphany—seeing God or Jesus—when we are engaged in hands on mission or other everyday work in God’s name.

So when the college students were asked:

“Why are you giving your time, energy, money, sweat to do mission work over your school break?”

I think an appropriate answer would be:

“We do this because we are baptized –
not just with water but with the Holy Spirit.”

In Luke’s version of the Baptism of Jesus, John says:

“I baptize you with water.
But one who is more powerful than I—Jesus—will
baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

What is the difference?

Just FYI: Our word "baptize" is adopted from the Greek word *baptizo*, which literally means "dip, immerse, submerge."

This Greek word **was not unique** to religion—the ancients baptized dishes and clothes to cleanse them.

The Christian tradition has applied the word Baptize solely to religion and ritual.

Back to our question:

“What is the difference in John’s baptism with water and the promised baptism with the Holy Spirit?”

John used water—for cleansing—understood as repentance—a desire to turn away from the old and move into the new

In part, Christian Baptism is a ***baptism of repentance still***.

In Christian baptism, we either tacitly or explicitly acknowledge our need for cleansing, and that we cannot accomplish this cleansing ourselves.

In another sense, ***Baptism is*** more than cleansing.
It is also like ***resurrection and creation***

John Wesley says of Baptism:

"It requires no less power to quicken a dead soul, than to raise a body that lies in the grave. Reviving a dead soul is making a new creation; and none can create a soul anew, but He who at first created the heavens and the earth" [*Works*, 8:5].

This great work of regeneration—making a new life from an old one—Wesley believed, could be accomplished by nothing less than baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Have I lost you yet??

If you are still struggling with how baptism with water and baptism with the Holy Spirit are different, then you are in good company. Through the ages denominations and theologians have debated and are still debating it.

But here is what we know:

Both water baptism and Spirit baptism are ***initiatory and identifying events***—water baptism is for us the outward symbol of the inward work of the Spirit baptism.

Just as the Baptism of Jesus identified him as the Beloved Son of God and initiated his ministry in 1st century Palestine and beyond,
so Christian Baptism marks us—identifies us as brothers and sisters of Christ and starts our ministry as Christian people.

So what is this ***baptism with the Holy Spirit?***

To "baptize in the Holy Spirit" is to immerse or dip a person in the Holy Spirit—to flood a person with the Holy Spirit. The "baptism of the Holy Spirit" involves being covered with, immersed in, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The celestial fissure—I like that term—celestial fissure—
the moment when the heavens are torn apart at The Baptism of Jesus—

and the presence of the Holy Spirit
are signs that God does not and will not remain hidden.

EPIPHANY!

Here is the bottom line:

Jesus received the Spirit at his baptism in order to pass it on—and so do we receive the ***Holy Spirit in order to pass it on.***

Baptism is just the beginning—we are identified with Christ and initiated into a life of faith.

Baptism is a basic of Christian identity and purpose—

Your baptism was—or for some of you will be—the start of your journey in faith—of finding a faith that fits

By virtue of our baptism we are backed by the Holy Spirit and a whole team of Christians bracing and encouraging us.

If you have not yet been baptized, I invite you to pray about it and talk to Pastor David. If you have been baptized, then I invite you to remember your Baptism and be thankful!

Baptized or not, you are invited to consider whether and how you have been immersed in the Holy Spirit.

Regardless of the amount of water, the method of sprinkling or dunking, or the practice of infant baptism,

Jesus, the beloved son of God— wants you flooded with his Spirit,
and anything less isn't enough—

Anything less than being flooded with the Spirit of Christ is not enough because it is the baptism of the Holy Spirit that ***creates the new being inside each of us so that we can reveal Christ to others.***

Finding a faith that fits means

- Acknowledging the work that God has already done in you in your Baptism
- Revealing God through your words and actions

In our baptism we have been ***prewashed***—identified as beloved sons and daughters of God and ***fitted for*** a life that honors God.

How will you respond?

The college students I worked with in South Florida responded this way:

Having been baptized by water ***and the Spirit***, they came out of the dry wall dust and I heard the voice of God saying you are my beloved sons and daughters.