

Inferiority Complex and Identity Crisis

Mark 1:4-11

1-10-21

Baptism of Our Lord

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I remember when it was fashionable and affordable and legal to go out of state for vacations. We used to take some delight in seeing cars with Texas license plates go by; we'd honk and wave as if seeing old friends. When I was away at school I was well known as a Texan and a Southerner, and those of us from Texas exiled to Minnesota where Lutherans are dense always stuck together. But so did the Norwegians.

We like to belong, to make connections, to know we are not alone. A group, a nation, a football team, a school, a church, a community, a town; we like to identify with others. It gives us a sense of worth; we need to know we belong or we get an identity crisis.

After all, there's enough loneliness in the world, and enough things that happen to make us feel cut-off, alone, helpless, worthless, lifeless, inferior.

The Bible, and the Christian Church, have been criticized for feeding people's feelings of inadequacy. There are great things asked of us. Great tasks. It seems too hard sometimes to do this Christian life, with so little reward, so little glory. **Obey all the Ten Commandments. Pray without ceasing. Memorize Bible verses. Give 10% of your income to God. Volunteer your time to do good works. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Visit the sick. Read your Bible. Forgive your enemies. Join in worship with others of the faithful. Be able to explain who people like Paul, & James & John, and Naaman & Elisha are.** Can anyone really do all that? Isn't that what we hired the preacher to do for us? These might be called the law.

We learned from Freud and psychology that the ego is a fragile thing, and needs to be

built up. Telling people that they are worthless sinners and calling them to servanthood can't help their egos any.

Pointing out the Law of Moses and the even stricter laws of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount can only show people that they need help -- that they are mean and low creatures who can't pull themselves out of the mire.

But it's easy to convince most people of that, so we usually hear more law preaching than gospel, grace, & acceptance. And you'll notice that those churches are bigger where the people can go and feel that they've gotten their spanking for the week. They've fed their inferiority complex.

And the second biggest churches are those where people can hear the loopholes. The new morality, concessions to this or that or the other modern trend. Relax the law and those who don't want the spanking will come.

But all of this is just law by itself. Jesus brings both law and gospel.

After the Law convicts us of sin and rebellion, the gospel frees us from that sin -- we can't atone ourselves, so God has sent his son, in love, to forgive, to take us and our sin on himself. That's gospel. But then we have a new law -- we must respond to God's love with love of our own.

John the Baptizer baptized those who repented for the forgiveness of sins. And he was doing a land office business, putting on quite a show with his Elijah costume -- living in the wilderness as if he was the prophet himself -- and the people could say, "Look, there's John, out there making himself uncomfortable, living like that so I can enjoy his favor with God -- he'll earn the brownie points and I'll share them."

Then John says, "Look, I'm not so hot, I'm just here for the one who comes after me. I'm in the mire myself -- he's the higher one, God's anointed -- and he'll bring the Holy Spirit."

When Jesus arrives, what does he do? He joins us in the mire! He goes to John and he says, "I need your baptism of water and repentance, that I might be one with those who need the cleansing of water and the word." And joining us, he is visited by the Spirit & affirmed by God as the pleasing son. We don't have to feel inferior - God has become one of us -- we're worth the life of his only son.

At the Austin airport the ticket agents had been handling the rush of passengers boarding the plane quite well, when a fellow came barging up to the counter and loudly accused them of inefficiency. And he demanded to know, "Do you know who I am?"

One of the agents turned to the other and said, "This man needs our help. He doesn't know who he is."

We don't have this kind of identity crisis either. We know who we are.

Theologically, the church doesn't recognize the names of babies until they are baptized. The last name of anybody doesn't count. The first name is the Christian name.

In the state of baptism, we know who we are -- we are baptized into the body of Christ, part of him who once was baptized with us into the predicament of fleshly life, but who as God's son brought us to the state of pleasing him.

Now we don't have to feel alone. We are part of the fellowship of believers, but more important even than that, we fellowship with him who gave his life for us, who was raised for us, and in whose cross we are raised from the dead to eternal life.

Now when we stand before the awesome task of pleasing God, we don't have to feel inferior or inadequate. The task is done for us. We don't have the heavy burden of the law, but the joy of the Gospel. And out of this joy it is easy to respond with love.

There are great things asked of us. Great tasks. But now it's not too hard to do this Christian life. **Obey all the Ten Commandments. Pray without ceasing. Memorize some Bible verses. Give 10% of your income to God. Volunteer your time to do good works. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Visit the sick. Read your Bible. Forgive your enemies. Join in worship with others of the faithful. Be able to explain who people like Paul, and James and John, and Naaman & Elisha are.**

These are not great things. These are just parts of a wonderful, simple, ordinary thing called the life of faith. But the parts can help us to see the whole. Little steps on the way to the great goal. The goal is wholeness, shalom, peace with God.

No matter what the task God gives us in life, the moment of healing for us is the moment we find our right place in relationship to Christ Jesus. In that moment the hardest of tasks is transformed into something warm and inviting.

We have the body and blood of God's son given and shed for us, that we might know that we are no longer inferior and inadequate, but forgiven, reconciled, made whole, one with God through Jesus Christ. We have identity. Chosen and called out as the body of Christ.

We belong to him. We serve in and through him. He has been baptized to make it so. We have been baptized, and that makes it so.

Lord, keep us in a right relationship, that we may say no to everything that makes it more difficult to say yes to you.