

Matthew 3:13-17

January 8, 2013 Baptism of the Lord

becoming who you are

Roy W. Howard

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, what some might call the great breaking-apart that created the splintered Church, the one we Protestants know. It's likely, at least in some circles that we will hear much about the Reformation and especially Martin Luther during this year. As well we should. Luther was flawed man, as all people are; and we need not forget that to remember his life and the astonishing courage it took for him to confront an institution that had descended into a mockery of the gospel in every aspect. What was particularly offensive was use of indulgences leveled upon the poor along with the notion that such payments alone would merit the love of God and the blessing of the church.

What gave Luther the courage to confront the Church was his personal experience of the gospel at the heart of the Christian faith. As he crawled on his knees up the Church steps he heard as if for the first time the message of the Gospel: God loves us and through no merit of our own, saves us from our sins through grace. We need not fear God, nor seek to prove our worthiness through our own works that satisfy an angry God. This is the truth that transformed Martin Luther. It is the truth of the gospel that gave him the courage to confront a massive institution with 95 theses nailed to a door. In an age of ecumenical harmony, we might forget such courage or even dismiss it as unnecessary. But that would be a mistake. Courage is the virtue that comes from knowing God's love is for us and never against us. And it remains this courage that is needed when confronting institutions and its leaders when they go astray from God's way. Grace is fount of courage.

It seems fitting to remember Martin Luther on a day that we remember our baptismal promise, dedicated our lives to Christ and ordain our officers.

Jesus went down to the river Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist. When he came up from the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending upon him like a dove. Then he heard a voice: "this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." It's a remarkable scene of the Trinity down by the riverside; the Son of God dripping wet while hearing the Father and sensing the Spirit poured upon him. Immediately following this moment, the same Spirit leads him into the wilderness where he will have to claim his essential identity in a struggle with the devil.

Today we, who hear this story, remember our own baptism, claiming for ourselves the promise of God that we, too, are the beloved in whom God is well pleased. How on earth can we make this claim? We make this claim because in our baptism we have been united with Christ. This is grace. It's God's gift. In Christ, we are the beloved of God. Our true self is coming into being throughout our lives as we let go of all that is false and receive the life of Christ.

This is why Martin Luther in his darkest moments of despair and depression could cry out in faithful defiance, "*I am baptized!*" You will not be surprised to know that the Reformation did not always go well. The congregations that formed descended into quarrels with each other and their pastors often failed to lead with integrity. Some even abandoned their calling. In the last years of his life this reality broke Martin Luther's heart. He battled with depression, became bitter and worried aloud whether the whole Reformation was a massive failure. These are the dark days of Luther's worst writings, too. Yet, when he cried aloud in prayer – *I am baptized* – he was clinging dearly to the eternal promise that in Christ he is the Beloved of God. In the end, as the Church failed him, this gospel was the only thing that saved him. So it is with us: we are saved by grace and grace alone.

Like Jesus, we have mighty struggles - in a variety of devilish forms - that threaten our essential identity as a beloved child of God. It is easy to forget who you are when you are told (and believe) that you are the sum of your failures. Or likewise, it is easy to forget who you are when you are told (and believe) that you are the sum of your successes, and the more you have, the better you are. Neither your successes nor your failures define you. God does; and in relentless mercy, God loves you without regard to your failures or successes. You must let go of both and come to the Lord open handed to receive. Like the tattered saints that have gone on before us, you are a flawed, beloved human being on the journey of letting go, becoming who you are. This life-long process of letting go of your false self is the journey life that only concludes in death.

And so it is that all the way, you and I claim the promise of the Beloved: "*I am baptized.*"

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.