

**Message: “Why Do You Come To Me?”<sup>1</sup>**

**Have you ever known a polar bear?** I’m not talking about a real bear. I mean the people who decide the best way to celebrate the new year is by finding an ice-covered body of water and jumping in. There must be something going on with these folks. You read about mishaps taking place: heart attacks, frostbite, and more. Yet, they keep doing it. Not only that, but they’re open about it. They talk about what a wonderful experience it is. They’re filled with enthusiasm. They definitely invite people to join them in their madness: “Come on in; the water’s fine!”

**I’m always suspicious when someone tells me that.** Even in the heat of summer, when a friend is swimming in a pool and tells me not to worry, the water’s fine, I find it hard to trust. I don’t like the chill of plunging into icy water. Oh, it can be refreshing when you’re sweating like crazy, and the air temperature hits triple digits. But most of the time, I’m reluctant. I don’t like to shiver. I don’t like to lose the feeling in my toes.

**At the same time, I don’t like being left out.** When it looks like folks are having fun and I’m standing on the side watching, my desire to join in the party sometimes overrides my fear of freezing, and I jump in too. Or wade in. Slowly. But I get there eventually.

**John stood in the waters of the Jordan River and shouted out, “Come on in; the water’s fine.”** Some joined him, while others stood on the shore. He had a word or two for those on the shore, but that’s a different passage for another day. Today, let’s look at One who took him up on the invitation and joined him in the waters.

**There are just a whole lot of things going on with this little gospel moment, and I can’t pretend to deal with them all here.** We know how seriously the church takes these things by the level of debate surrounding baptism. First of all, there’s infant versus believer baptism. Then there’s the question of method – sprinkle or immerse, followed by the liturgical issues, such as do you invoke the whole Trinity or simply baptize in the name of Jesus? These matters have been debated for centuries and are no closer to resolution now than they were then.

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<sup>1</sup> Material adapted from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/glimpses-of-the-kin-dom/baptism-of-the-lord-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/baptism-of-the-lord-year-a-preaching-notes>

**And don't look for me to resolve them here either!** I'm a United Methodist and hold to the validity of infant baptism but accept those who choose believer's baptism. I'm a United Methodist and recognize our tradition is weighted toward sprinkling but have baptized candidates by immersing them in pools. I've baptized infants, young people and adults. I use the liturgy our church provides but also acknowledge our understanding of the sacrament comes from Jesus directly.

**And I find meaning in all of it.** I find justification for baptizing in a variety of ways, in a variety of settings, with a variety of words. But there's one aspect that must be present, in my way of thinking.

**When Jesus climbed down the bank into the river, John was shocked.** How he knew who Jesus really was, we aren't told. Maybe it is something from their shared family history that gave John the clue as to who was standing in front of him. Maybe it was a whisper from the Spirit in John's ear as Jesus approached and what he heard made him think something was wrong in the way this was happening.

**Maybe there was something about Jesus** that caused fishermen to leave their nets, broken people to reach out in hope, and powerful people to tremble in their boots. We know this wild man from the desert wanted to be blessed instead of attempting to confer a blessing. We don't know what happened to cause John to say what he said. Or caused Matthew to record what he said. But something did. There's a sense of what was right and what was wrong. And John's sense of what was right was Jesus should be the one blessing, the one baptizing, not him.

**Yet, Jesus says, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness"** (3:15). Let it be so for now? What does this mean? Let's go through the motions? And what is this righteousness Jesus is trying to fulfill?

**The truth is, we don't really know what it means.** We have some guesses, and some are more certain than others. But we don't really know. What makes sense to me is that Jesus is saying, "I want to join you. I want to be seen joining the group. I want my ministry, my life, my witness to be one about becoming a part of the body, about joining up with the kingdom of God."

**John's hesitation may have to do with his understanding of baptism for repentance, forgiveness of sins.** And this One had no need to have sins forgiven. So, why would he consent to this baptism? Maybe Jesus' view of what was happening was larger. Maybe John, and most of us, think of repentance as turning away. When we repent, we turn away from our sins, our life of sin. We're sorry for what went on before. We're sorry for what we did before and we're pledging to not engage in those behaviors again. That is how we understand repentance. This focus tends to be on what leads us away from God.

**What if Jesus understood repentance to be primarily a turning toward?** What if the gesture Jesus was making was one of inclusion, acceptance or entrance? This focus is on God and the nature of God, particularly forgiveness. This was a beginning moment for the ministry Jesus would do and teach those who follow him to do. This was a sign something new was about to be launched. And this new thing was nothing less than the kingdom of God, nothing less than a new way of living in community.

**Righteousness refers to being faithful to relationships.** You can't be righteous all by yourself. You're righteous with God and righteous with one another. Righteousness implies a relationship. The necessary requirement for baptism in The United Methodist Church is the community. Baptism is a corporate act. It's almost always done as a part of worship. And when in extreme cases it's not a part of a regular worship service, then the community must be represented. Baptism is an entrance into the fellowship of believers. It's joining up with the body. Once you've been baptized, you're never alone. There is always a family around you. You've joined something larger than yourself, which is sometimes startling, but always worthwhile.

**So, come on in. The water's fine.**

**Matthew 3:13-17 (CEB)**

At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River so that John would baptize him. John tried to stop him and said, “I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?”

Jesus answered, “Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness.”

So John agreed to baptize Jesus. When Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up out of the water. Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. A voice from heaven said, “This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him.