

Be Different for Christ's Sake

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
January 14, 2018—The Baptism of Jesus

- Mark 1:9-11 ⁹Not long afterward Jesus came from Nazareth in the province of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰As soon as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw heaven opening and the Spirit coming down on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you."
- Luke 6: 27-31 ²⁷"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹If anyone hits you on one cheek, let him hit the other one too; if someone takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well. ³⁰Give to everyone who asks you for something, and when someone takes what is yours, do not ask for it back. ³¹Do for others just what you want them to do for you."
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Our baptism signals our vow to embody the love of Christ rather than our self-serving human nature.

I know that Christmas is still "in our rear-view mirror," so to speak, but permit me to tell a story related to Easter. Tony Robinson is a pastor from Seattle. Recently in his online blog he recalled hearing someone tell

...a story about an "Easter Chicken." A cute little chick was given to a child on Easter. The chick had been dyed some bright color like pink or yellow.

After Easter, when the chick's novelty had worn off, it was tossed into the chicken coop with the rest of the birds. The bigger chickens pecked away mercilessly at the odd, little bird. He didn't even have the good sense to defend himself.

But after a week or two had passed, the Easter Chicken had grown out its feathers to the point that it was beginning to look like the others. And it had begun to join the fray in the coop, giving as good as it got. Soon it was indistinguishable from the rest.

The guy telling the story said the Easter Chicken was like the church. "How so?" [Pastor Tony] asked. "Well, we started out different but it wasn't long before we were acting just like everyone else—like that Easter chicken."¹

Today we mark a particular occasion in the life of Jesus that doesn't get nearly as much attention as some. The baptism of Jesus just doesn't seem to rank up there with his birth at Christmas, his death on Good Friday, his resurrection on Easter. Why don't we

¹ From "The Easter Chicken" by Tony Robinson in StillSpeaking, a Daily Devotional at dailydevotional@ucc.org, January 5, 2018

give his baptism more attention? After all, it's described or alluded to in all four gospels.²

We've all heard of John the Baptist. John "the Baptist" got his nickname because he was a traveling preacher who performed a lot of baptisms. John's impassioned appeals to his audiences urged them to have a change of heart, to turn away from unseemly behavior, to resolve to try more concertedly to follow the way of God. And to mark their new commitment to living with a different attitude John urged people to receive the ritual of symbolic cleansing – baptism.

So it was that Jesus happened to be in the crowd one day. Did you know that Jesus and "Baptizin' John" knew each other? They did. Their mothers Mary and Elizabeth were cousins, so it's likely that the two boys grew up playing with each other. But then they went their separate ways. Apparently Jesus took over his father's woodworking business after Joseph died. John left home to carry out his traveling ministry. John's ministry centered on preaching about God's promise to send one to be a champion, an advocate, a savior for the Jewish people – a "Messiah."

That was the message John was preaching when one day he looked up and saw his first-cousin-once-removed among a group of people approaching John for baptism. Why would Jesus be baptized? It's not like he would need to be forgiven for something. No, Jesus received the symbolic cleansing of baptism to mark a start, an initiation, a new direction, a new commitment. Jesus was baptized to signal to himself and to the world that he was committing himself to something new, something different, something revolutionary. The person Jesus was going to model for all to see what it would look like to live a life intentionally seeking God's way, God's will, God's hope for humankind.

That certainly would make Jesus stand out. It was also sure to ruffle some feathers.

Think for a moment. Us... we like to get along. We like to be liked. Usually most of us like to blend in with the crowd, to not make waves. Yes, occasionally we might want to stand out, draw attention to ourselves. Maybe we raise our impassioned voices in support of or in opposition to some cause. Maybe we try to attract attention by wearing a particularly flashy piece of clothing or jewelry. Maybe we watch a sub-zero parade to express our frustration with a beloved football team. Maybe we gather with others outside a courthouse to protest unjust immigration policies.

Yes, on occasion we might seek to stand out. But mostly most of us like to blend in, go with the flow. We don't want to make waves, cause problems, upset the applecart, disrupt the status quo. "Most of the time the church, and we who call ourselves 'Christian,' are a lot like the Easter Chicken. Our color fades and we play by the same rules as everyone else. It's hard to tell any real difference."³

But here's what we learn from the biblical report that Jesus sought to be baptized: we learn that Jesus wants us to be different. He wants us to be different from what our innate human nature makes us. He wants us to be different from how society tries to get

² Matt. 3:13-17; Mk. 1:9-11; Lk. 3:21-22; Jn. 1:29-34

³ From "The Easter Chicken" by Tony Robinson in [StillSpeaking, a Daily Devotional](http://dailydevotional@ucc.org) at dailydevotional@ucc.org, January 5, 2018

us simply to ignore the presence of injustice in race and economics and power and influence. He wants us to be different from those who ignore or even tolerate disrespectful, insensitive words and attitudes and actions. Jesus wants us to be different from those people who are comfortable enough and don't want to make waves lest they damage their own situation.

Whatever else you may think about the words of Jesus..., it's pretty clear that they are seriously at odds with the way the world works. They remind us just how subversive of the world Christianity is.... But the world needs Christians to be different, to not be just the same as everyone else. A good start on that path may be to simply listen to Jesus' strange words and to let them stand. Resist the impulse to explain them away. Let them haunt you and maybe even change you.⁴

Recall what we heard earlier:

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹If anyone hits you on one cheek, let him hit the other one too; if someone takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well."⁵

Jesus sought baptism to mark his launch into his life's mission. His mission was to show us what our lives will look like when we're God-centered and not simply behaving based on our intrinsic human nature.

- By nature most of us tend to be wired for revenge. Jesus teaches that God molds our hearts for forgiveness.
- By nature most of us tend to be wired for suspicion of anything or anyone new or different. Jesus teaches that God molds our hearts for gracious acceptance.
- By nature most of us tend to be wired for resentment when we feel short-changed in any way. Jesus teaches that God molds our hearts to show appreciation and gratitude for the blessings that are ours.
- By nature most of us tend to be wired for self-interest. Jesus teaches that God molds our hearts to seek justice for everyone.

Living the way Jesus proposes makes us different. Whether we chose to be baptized or that choice was made for us, by being baptized we have vowed to be different... for Christ's sake. Being different for Christ's sake causes us to be noticed. We can't blend in like that Easter Chicken that grew out of its colored feathers.

We are baptized because Jesus was baptized. On today's commemoration of that pivotal step in his life and ministry we rededicate ourselves to being different. As followers of Jesus we vow to be different for Christ's sake, relating to others out of love not self-interest, knowing that all the while we are guided and protected, strengthened and encouraged by God's Holy Spirit.

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⁴ From "The Easter Chicken" by Tony Robinson in StillSpeaking, a Daily Devotional at dailydevotional@ucc.org, January 5, 2018

⁵ Luke 6:27-29 Good News translation