

This week's gospel reading from Matthew talks to us about Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. Baptism is a significant ritual in the Christian church, but the meaning and the ritual behind an individual being baptized can be very different.

Looking around this room, I'm guessing that it is safe to presume that most of you do not remember your first baptism. Most of you were originally part of another religion prior to you coming to St. Paul's or joining the UCC. It's a safe guess since the UCC wasn't formed until 1957 and we did not become St. Paul's and join the UCC until 1974. A couple of you were probably born before 1974.

In my discussions with you, I know that we have a number of previous religious faiths represented. We have Methodists, Catholics, Congregational Christians, and Baptists represented among us. And I'm sure that most of you do not remember being baptized originally. I say that because a number of religions baptize individuals when they are infants.

I thought that this was interesting, because we heard in today's reading that John the Baptist was baptizing adults. He did this so that they could cleans their past sins and enter into salvation.

John preached to the Jews and eventually the Gentiles, that the path to God was through salvation. If an individual truly believed and wanted to live a righteous lifestyle they could find God. But, righteous did not mean morally correct and being without sin. John meant righteousness as living faithfully with God.

So many people can be identified as Sunday Christians. They go to church, they pray, they make their offerings and join in fellowship. But as soon as their alarm clocks go off on Monday they are right back leading an unchristian lifestyle. They lie, they steal, they cheat all week long. And then Sunday comes back and they are front and center acting as though they did nothing wrong all week.

I'm sure we all know people like that, they obviously attend other churches and not ours, but they are out there. John identified them as the Pharisees and refused to baptize them. We've discussed the Pharisees before and found them to have questionable scruples. And here John calls them out for not really believing in baptism or wanting to change and lead a righteous lifestyle.

For John's ministry, people were required to find him much like Jesus did. John did not go out and search for people. They came to him to be submerged in the Jordan River. So, not only did they have to confess all of their wrong doings in front of everyone; they were immersed in water for fear of death. So, getting baptized was very serious for most people.

So, I can kind of see why John would say that Jesus did not need to be baptized by him. Jesus was without sin. What was there for him to confess? John also saw Jesus as the Messiah, so his place was guaranteed in heaven. Another reason that Jesus should baptize John instead.

But, Jesus was there for the real point of John's ministry. He was there to lead a righteous lifestyle. He was there to show his full faith in God and to accept the risks and show that he was like everyone else. Jesus' baptism was about his place with us and not his place with God.

As a result, God announced that Jesus was his son and he was proud. Jesus easily could have placed himself about that. But he didn't. He walked among us. He sought out people for his ministry. He shared his wisdom, faith, and love.

How many times do we act like John and not Jesus? How many times do we put people unnecessarily on pedestals? We go above and beyond to impress them, but we find out they are no better than we are?

I remember the first time that my dad asked me to carve the turkey for thanksgiving. I was so nervous. It had always been his job. I thought that he should be standing next to me walking through how to do it step by step.

I could have easily shut down and told Dad that he needed to do it so I could watch. He was better, and it was tradition. Who was I to take that away from him? But, I realized that there was no point in me getting worked up about it. I realized that this was a point of transition. I was moving away from being a child to being an adult, just like everyone else.

We can live like John and have everyone come to us. We survive on whatever we can scrounge. We still help others but on our terms. Or we can be like Jesus, we seek out others, we follow the righteous path because it is the right thing to do and not because we have to. We choose to be who we are and not what is expected of us by others. Amen.