

Matthew 3:13-16
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Who are We?

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13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

When people want to know who you are, after you give your name what do you tell them?

I think it depends on the context. In an alumni group, it's probably the year you graduated, your major, your favorite professor. In a business setting, it's likely the company you work for, your position, maybe where you studied.

When I was working in Paris in my twenties, my French and my accent were good enough to impress the famously-critical locals. What they wanted to know was **where I was from**. It was fun to watch their surprise when I replied nonchalantly: Houston, Texas.

Here, in church, it's different.

Visitors at Christmas services introduced themselves to me in various ways. Out of towners told me where they live, the church they attend. A local family explained they had come because they needed to be in church with all of the current uncertainty.

But the huge majority led with their relationship to a member of the congregation: like Bri Keller's sister, or Joan Gudorf's mother.

Here, in church, it's about relationships. That's what matters most---it's who we are.

In a parish church like this, our relationships endure well beyond the grave. We hold in honor the earthly remains of members in our columbarium. We remember others through the presence of their descendants: like Beth Reed, whose Grandma Crary began our day care ministry decades ago; Gwen Stevens, whose mother

stitched the banner in the Tower entrance; Ed Crandall and Boo Bremner, whose grandparents built this church.

Relationship is the essence of our faith. At our own baptism we are welcomed into the Christian family. We take our place at this communion table. We become part of in the eternal mystery of the Body of Christ—which Richard Rohr calls the Body of Love. It is who we are. It's who we continue to become.

In today's gospel, Jesus' baptism, Matthew tells us who HE is.

Actually, Matthew never minced words about who Jesus was; off the bat he's called "Jesus, the Messiah". His descent traced back to Abraham. In Matthew, the Angel told Joseph the child was God's own: "Emmanuel, God with us".

With all of that, it's a bit of a puzzle why Jesus has to be baptized at all. And our patron John raises the question.

The voice from heaven provides the answer. It's different here from the other gospels. In Mark and Luke, the voice says. "**You** are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased." Addressed to Jesus, those words might have been a whisper, not heard by anybody else.

Here the voice says "**This is my Son**, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased;" it's a public declaration of Jesus' identity, for all to hear and know.

Public declarations are important: like marriage vows or oaths of office. They are special moments in which we say who we are **out loud**, making a commitment to a person, to a set of responsibilities, to a community.

A few times a year--like today--we Episcopalians have the privilege of making a public declaration about who we are as people of faith.

It's called the Baptismal Covenant.

The Baptismal Covenant has two parts. First we affirm who WE say GOD is—using the words of the 4th century testament of faith known as the Apostles Creed.

We then say who WE are because of our relationship to God. We affirm our commitment—with God's help--to live our lives accordingly. We promise five things:

- 1) to be the church; to gather in community, sharing Word and Sacrament, prayer and thanksgiving
- 2) mindfully to strive against our own failings, and to seek forgiveness when we fall short
- 3) to embody and declare our faith in the world
- 4) to love our neighbor
- 5) and to work for universal justice, peace and dignity.

These five promises are so powerful that they have radically affected the identity of this denomination. In the forty years since we made the Baptismal Covenant a central part of our Sunday worship, the Episcopal Church has become an ever stronger voice for justice in environmental and social justice. It's why we were the first main-line denomination to ordain openly-gay clergy, and to bless same-sex unions.

Our baptismal promises form our deepest values and practices as individuals, too. I know they have mine. When my parents had simultaneous short-term health crises in their 80s, we four children rushed in. We took over. We did too much for them until—recalling the fifth promise--I realized we were failing to respect their dignity. We backed off; and they resumed their independent life.

In baptism, publically we receive the blessing of God's love. In the Baptismal Covenant we **say out loud** what that blessing means to who we are in the world. As God's beloved children, we say we will to embrace EVERYONE: recognize, honor, respect and love everyone **equally** as a member of God's family, too—with God's help.

We all are one, dear friends. One creation. One race: the human race. One family:
God's family. Bound together in the one Love.

That is who we are.