



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN

As human beings we all long for a sense of connectedness. We long to be part of something bigger than ourselves. This is not new in the course of human history.

5000 years ago, the Hindus culture was bound by a practice of human suspension. Do you know what human suspension is? Not long ago there was a special on National Geographic about cultural rituals groups of people performed. Human suspension is where someone allows someone else to pierce them with large gauge needles and hooks. These are about the diameter of my little finger and pierce the skin and fatty tissue. The hooks are then used to suspend the person in the air with the help of ropes and pulleys.

I thought that sort of stuff only happened on the TV show Criminal Minds but guess it has been around a long time. American Indian Tribes about 1000 years ago also used this ritual. To you and me it might seem downright disgusting and even stomach turning. But people who have experienced human suspension claim that they experience a sense of euphoria with being suspended. They also felt a part of a group of people who looked, thought, and felt like they did. Such rites of passage still have some following today with hopes of acquiring spiritual enlightenment, relaxation, physical endurance, quieting of the mind and gaining cultural acceptance. Thankfully, we as Christians, have baptism! I for one have not even found it desirable to get my ears pierced or to get a tattoo!

But I certainly have been baptized like most of you. In our Gospel reading today we see that the tremendous power of baptism is evident right from the start. This is the first occasion in the Bible that unites the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the celebration of God's love. In the form of a dove, the Spirit comes upon Jesus and then we hear the Father's voice acknowledging Jesus, as his beloved Son. What a beginning to Jesus' ministry. Jesus came to the river Jordan that day, as a human candidate for baptism and leaves as the heavenly proclaimed Son of God Almighty. Matthews words show us that this

event will leave human history changed forever. God is among us, and we are His in those same waters of baptism.

Some folks question why Jesus had to be baptized as it was typically a ritual for the cleansing of sins of the sinner. John baptized all who would repent of their sins. We all know that Jesus was the only perfect human and did not sin. So why did he feel the need to be baptized by John? Jesus came to John to be baptized in order to fulfill all righteousness, to take the next step in God's plan to reconcile the world to himself. I read these words written by commentator John MacArthur:

"Jesus' baptism was the first act of his ministry, the first step in the redemptive plan that He came to fulfill. He who had no sin took His place among those who had no righteousness. He who was without sin submitted to a baptism for sinners. In this act the Savior of the world took His place among the sinners of the world."

In other words, Jesus became as one of us so that, by God's grace, we might aspire to become more and more like Him. He wallowed in the unclean water in the Jordan River with other sinners to transform with them from sinfulness to righteousness. So now we will be able to grow in the knowledge of God's grace and love.

Three of our young people have been studying for a year and half in order to be confirmed in May. Confirmation should really be called Affirmation of Baptism. They were baptized as children with their parents and sponsors claiming the faith for them. And in May it will be their turn to stand in front of our congregation and say that they believe in Jesus acknowledging the power of the amazing waters of our baptismal ritual gifted to them, forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life. In John chapter 3, we hear Jesus say that "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."

Truly, baptism is not a suggestion. Christ clearly calls us to the water. Baptism is not an optional ritual. It is God's own act of saving grace. The Trinity is present at every baptism same as He was at the waters of the Jordan the day Jesus was baptized. Infants and adults and everyone in between at baptism is welcomed into the family of the faithful, washing them in the love of God in Christ Jesus. In baptism God is working in the water and His Word to accomplish his grace. It is nothing we do that can make us deserve baptism. God chooses us and He gets it right every time. Never is there a need to re-baptize. Not to say that you cannot reaffirm your baptism or remember it and the new life it promises, day after day.

And baptism is so important, as I mentioned that it is not optional. In fact, Matthew as he ends his Gospel writing shows Jesus commissioning the disciples by giving them and us too marching orders; "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

And so there you have it. The Gospel of our Lord where He is baptized by John in the waters of the Jordan, not because He needed it, but because we did and do. Jesus led the way across the muddy bank, going down to death in the baptismal water and coming up on the other side, resurrected and made new again, so that we would know how and might have courage enough to do the same. Jesus calls us to share in the baptism by water and the Holy Spirit that washes away our old sinful natures and leaves us shiny new people.

And we too will hear the words, "This is my Son or daughter, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And I admit that I do not fully understand the scope of the human suspension ritual, but I bet Jesus would have been right there to show these folks a different way to be loved. He would have told them that they do not have to go to such extremes to be accepted. Jesus would have been right there to tell them about the unconditional love He and the Father had for them and how the Holy Spirit would empower them and guide them to a new life, a better life with promises of forgiveness, abundant and eternal life.

Jesus went first and led the way for us. It is now up to us to carry God's unconditional love out into the world and to use the power of the Holy Spirit to live our lives as His disciples. Through the water and Word of baptism we are reborn anew creation, always acceptable to God and loved beyond our imagination. AMEN