

“Know your identity”

Based on Mark 1:4-11 and Genesis 1:1-5

By Klaudia Smucker

In the movie “The Help,” Aibileen, a maid for Elizabeth Leefolt, had a daily ritual with the little girl that she took care of every day. She would pick up the 2 year old Mae Mobley from her crib and sit in her rocking chair and say, “Mae Mobley, you is smart. You is kind. You is important.” She would make Mae Mobley repeat these words, hoping that they would seep into her heart and believe them. Mae Mobley’s mother, preoccupied with fitting in with her wealthier friends, ignores her daughter, and makes it obvious to her that she is a nuisance.

I’ve reminded my own children, before they headed off to a party or traveled somewhere to remember who they were. I wanted them to remember that they were God’s children. I would say, “Remember who you are. Make good

choices.” I hoped that would help them stay strong. I said these things, partly driven by fear, and partly because I wanted them to remember that as God’s beloved, they were able to rise above the temptations that faced them in the world. I would say these things, and they would roll their eyes and head out the door.

“Remember who you are and where you come from, otherwise, you don’t know where you are going,” said Katrina Kurkova, a model from Eastern Europe. She said these things to help her stay on track with her career goals. Staying on track requires knowing something about our own identities and how they shape us. I still remember things my parents said, as they hoped to instill Christian values and identity in me.

The story of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus is the only story that is told in all four gospels. The early church struggled with this story, because it begins with John the Baptist calling people to repent of their sins. Many have questioned why Jesus, sinless, and in no need of repentance, would have submitted to a baptism of repentance. Yet the call to repent was something that Jesus would have understood. As a Jewish boy, Jesus would have grown up hearing the words of Jeremiah saying, “No one need despair on account of his or her sins, for every penitent sinner is graciously received by God.” He would have heard the cries of the prophets throughout the Old Testament to call their people to repent and return to God.

Repentance was built into Jewish law. Jews call it Teshuvah, and Teshuvah is all about having a relationship with God. They believe, like we do, that sinning

breaks that relationship, and Teshuvah means returning to your relationship with God. The Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur is the culmination of 10 days of repentance. Regardless of why Jesus submitted to the baptism of repentance for sins, which Matthew says was “to fulfill all righteousness,” Jesus’ choice to be baptized is consistent with his character and his ministry, and his obedience to the law. He was not so heavenly minded that he was no earthly good. God came to be one of us, so it seems right that when Jesus gathered with the crowds out in the wilderness to hear John’s message, he stood in line with the poor, the sinful, the diseased, and the outcast and demonstrated that he was willing to get wet and dirty along with the rest of us. He waded into that murky water when it was his turn, submitting himself to God. This simple act of obedience to the law, to God’s intentions for all people to stay in relationship with Him, caused God to declare with a burst of pride and pleasure as the Spirit came upon his Son, “This is

my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” Jesus’ true identity was revealed.

As he felt the cold water covering his flesh and came out of the water, the air blowing against his clothing plastered to his skin, the Spirit descended upon him, reminding him of who He was. This was his moment to go back to, his reminder of where he came from, and his reminder that he was loved. It was his true north star. “You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” Remember your baptism, Jesus. He was God’s Son, he was Mary and Joseph’s son, and he was one of us.

In Ann Patchett’s novel, *The Patron Saint of Liars*, Rose and her daughter

Cecelia live at St. Elizabeth’s Home for Unwed Mothers. Rose, who had gone to the home herself many years before, pregnant with Cecelia, had stayed on and was the cook for the home where Cecelia grew up. One day a woman

came to the home and mistook Cecelia for one of the unwed mothers. Cecelia was embarrassed and said to herself, “No one had ever, ever mistaken me for one of them, not even as a joke. The lobby felt small and airless. I thought I was going to pass out.”

Jesus came to be one of us. Mark begins with “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” There is no doubt in his mind as to who Jesus is. Jesus saw and experienced the pain of being human. He understood and dealt with temptation before and after his baptism. Hebrews 4:15 says, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-yet without sin.” God’s revelation to Jesus at his baptism and his filling of the Holy Spirit was necessary because he was human. It was necessary to his understanding of his mission to

know his true identity, the divine revelation of his true relationship to God. The water and the Spirit were two integral parts of this experience.

Today, I want you to remember who you ultimately belong to. I want you to know who you are. I want you to close your eyes and remember your baptism. If you haven't been baptized yet, I want you to visualize with me what that would be like. Remember the water being poured over your head, or being laid down into the cold water of a slow moving stream and coming up with the Pastor saying, "and may the Spirit baptize you from above." Perhaps longer ago than your memory, your pastor dipped her hands in the water and made the sign of the cross on your forehead. Now hear these words of the Lord for you. "You are my beloved son (or beloved daughter) with whom I am well pleased." Even if you've taken a divergent path, even though it may have been very long ago, what

you did that day was important. It is imprinted in your soul. It claims you as God's beloved child. This is your true identity. You have been claimed forever by Christ. And in this, you also receive your true vocation; to participate in the building of the Kingdom of God.

Throughout our lives we will face ups and downs, and our faith will take different turns as we grow and turn away and grow again. We will face challenges, some which will sorely test our faith, and epiphanies, moments of revelation, to bring us back. Thomas Kennedy says, "The Christian vision of who the baptized are is counter-cultural. In Christian baptism our identities are fixed not so much by our action but by God's action. In baptism, God declares, 'You are mine; I am for you.' The baptized may run from God, may even mock and ridicule

the new and fixed identity given by God. But God's word is sure. 'You are my beloved.' "

What Jesus submitted to, and what John preached, was a baptism of repentance. When we get baptized, we renounce our sinful life, and commit to following him, which requires repentance on an ongoing basis. This is something that the Jewish people got right, when they asked their people to follow the rituals of repentance leading up to Yom Kippur, and what the church fathers created when they instituted Ash Wednesday and Lent, leading up to Easter. We like thinking of ourselves as God's beloved children, and it is good for us to remember that. Churches through the years have a mixed record of how we've dealt with sin and repentance.

One woman told me her painful memories in the Mennonite church of the ritual before communion where each person would have to go into a room and repent of any sins against a brother or sister. If they said “yes,” they were not allowed to take communion until they made it right. The idea wasn’t bad, but the public humiliation did more harm than good to that person’s relationship with God and the church.

A Methodist friend of mine found herself pregnant and very frightened, and went to her pastor for help. Her pastor got angry with her and kicked her out of the church. She never went to church again, and her choices since then have been self-destructive.

Repentance is one of the healthiest things that we can do, if we follow the example of Jesus. Jesus, who we believe was without sin, was always concerned

about his personal relationship with God. The gospels writers thought it was important for us to know that Jesus often went away, by himself, to pray and spend time with God. Jesus didn't hold himself above others, but stood in solidarity and love with the sinner. He didn't dismiss sin, saying, "Oh, no problem. No big deal." He would look at them in love and say things like, "Your sins are forgiven. Go and sin no more." He'd ask a question such as, "Do you want to be healed?" Sometimes when they asked for healing he would forgive sins first. Other times, especially with the religious hierarchy, he would remind them of their lack of love and the self-righteousness that was the log in their eye.

I get an online daily devotional every day from Father Richard Rohrer.

Around Christmas, he had a series on the Incarnation. He began with Philippians

2. "Have this mind in yourselves, which is in Christ Jesus, who though he was in

the form of God, did not count equality with God, a thing to be grasped at, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of the human.” (Philippians 2:5-7) He said, “It’s a gift to joyfully recognize and accept our own smallness and ordinariness. Then you are free with nothing to live up to, nothing to prove, and nothing to protect. Such freedom is my best description of Christian maturity, because once you know that your “I” has an inherent dignity and is objectively one with God, you can ironically be quite content with a small and ordinary “I.” No grandstanding is necessary. Any question of your own importance or value has already been resolved once and for all and forever.”

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Can we remember Jesus’ baptism as an example for us? Jesus submitted to God’s will and became small and ordinary, stepping into the waters of the Jordan,

and heard that he was loved. Can we hold in balance our smallness and
ordinariness, and our need to repent of certain attitudes, actions, naming those
things that keep us from loving God and others more fully? Can we also
remember that we are loved beyond our wildest dreams?

In the movie "The Lion King," the young cub Simba was shown the Kingdom
that he was to rule. Feeling quite special, he ran to Uncle Scar and said, "I'm
gonna be King of Pride Rock. My dad just showed me the whole kingdom. And
I'm gonna rule it all."

Later, after taking a divergent path, an isolated, humbled young adult
Simba is found by his friend Rafiki who wants to bring him back to rule the
Kingdom. Rafiki promises to show him his father, and takes him to a watering
hole.

Rafiki: "Look down there."

Simba: "That's not my father, that's my reflection."

R: "No. Look harder."

Simba touches the water and sees his father.

Rafiki: "You see? He lives in you."

Mufasa's ghost says, "Simba. You've forgotten me."

Simba: "How could I?"

Mufasa: "You have forgotten who you are and so have forgotten me. Look inside yourself, Simba. You are more than what you have become."

Simba: "How can I go back? I'm not who I used to be."

Mufasa: "Remember who you are. You are my son... Remember."

I have two large bowls filled with water. One is in the front, and one in the back.

There are towels beside the water. There is no one here who doesn't need to

repent of something, so I ask all of you to do this. Go to one of the bowls and dip

your hand in the water while quietly repenting of something you know that has

blocked or is blocking your relationship with God, and remember that you are

God's beloved child. Remember who you are. I'm going to have a short time of

silence. I will go to the bowl and dip my hand in the water, and invite you also to

come. There are small bowls for some of you to take to others who may not be

able to move out of their seats.

And then, Keith will lead us in a song of response.