Sunday June 13, 1982

"GOD KNOWS YOUR NAME" Mark 1:4-11 (on Baptism)

We've all been asked the question, "Who are you" or "What's your name?" When we're asked "What's your name," we're also being asked, "What family do you come from?" The question "Who are You" can have various answers because we each live out many roles and are different people at different times. You might be a parent, a worker, a friend, a spouse, a brother or sister, a son or daughter, a grandparent, a professional, and more. All of these are different titles for different roles.

But beyond your family name and the roles you fill, "Who are you? What is the one name or description which defines you most accurately? Even Jesus had to answer that question. This is what the story of his baptism is all about which we read earlier from the gospel of Mark. It was a moment of self-discovery when that question which is asked of every person was asked of him--"Who are you? What is your name? And Jesus heard God say, "You are my son. I know your name!"

Today in this service of worship as in many of our worship services we have baptized several infants. After this service another baptism will take place. And on those Sundays when new members are received, we also from time to time perform the sacrament of baptism for those adults who have not been baptized before.

What is baptism all about? Why do we do it to infants as well as adults? I often ask parents, "Why do you want your child baptized? And the answers are varied. Sometimes the answers are even surprising.

In my first parish, I took the father of an infant who was about to be baptized aside and asked, "Are you prepared for this solemn event?" I guess so, he replied, "I've got two hams,pickles, bread, cake and cookies." "No, NO,"I said, "I mean are you spiritually prepared?" "Well, I don't know," replied the man thoughtfully, "Do you think two cases of beer and five bottles of wine are enough?"

To better understand the meaning of baptism, let's look first at its origins, and then we'll look at its Christian meaning.

Baptism is an ancient custom. Long before the time of Jesus, the Jews practiced baptism with water for those who converted to Judiasm, that is those who had not been born into the Jewish tradition, but wanted to become Jews.

Many scholars believe that this early Jewish baptism and maybe even early Christian baptism was self-administered. Self-baptism by immersion, for example, was the usual Jewish rite for cleansing of women after childbirth, and for Jewish converts, presumably to wash away the defilements of idolatry. In the latter case the candidate immersed himself while two person stood by and recited to him portions of the law.

John the Baptist took this ancient Jewish rite and gave it a new meaning. He invited Jews who had always been Jews, who had been born into the tradition, and who thought they therefore needed to do nothing more, to be baptized as a sign of their repentance. This was a radical innovation for the use of baptism. John the Baptist was asserting that the qualification for membership of the true Israel was ethical, not racial and that Gentiles were as much loved by God as the Jews. This didn't make him very popular.

Then one day, Jesus came to be baptized by John. Following this the early church used baptism for all people, Jews and Gentiles who wanted to become Christians. And from then on the church has been practicing the sacrament of baptism. It is the church's central symbol of identity. It enlists our attention to those basic human questions, "Who am I, What is my name?"

The Biblical story goes to the heart of the matter. It says quite clearly that Jesus joined others in yearning for the coming of God's kingdom. He identified with the sins of his people, just as if they were his sins. But most of all, his baptism was a moment of definition, of identity and of commitment.

When he heard God's voice say to him, "You are my son," he responded, "If this is who I am, then I am important to God and I must have something important to do with my life.

The use of water in baptism came about for the simplest of reasons. In a place like Israel, it's a precious liquid. Water also suggests washing and in baptism the washing away of the past and of beginning anew.

But water also has deeper meanings. We remember the primeval waters over which God brooded in the moments of creation. We ponder the fact that all life emerged from the deeps of the ocean. We are touched by truth when we discover that each of us begins life in the amniotic fluid of our mother's womb, very much like sea water itself. And we know that our bodies are mostly water. Who would deny what is deeper even than symbolism--water is the most motherly and life-giving of the elements.

Futhermore there is in baptism in water also the symbolism of dying and of being born to a new life, or being born into a new awareness of who you really are and that God knows your name.

But there is even more to baptism than this. A parent holding a newborn child marvels at this miracle, this new life. And parents with newborn children realize their awesome responsibility. This new life has been entrusted to them. Parents then too, naturally want to celebrate and to engage in some act which relates this new baby to the source and meaning of all life.

Unfortunately, not all babies are seen in this way. Not all parents want to celebrate and give thanks for the new life. There are children who are not wanted or not wanted at a particular time, or not wanted for the right reason. A child's birth may be an occastion of separation, of destruction, and of death. Many people wish they had not been born. However, no matter how one views the birth of a child or one's own birth--each individual is still a child of God, even though not always so treated.

God claims every child in a manner which says: You are mine by reason of my love and the final meaning of your life will be found in your realtionship with God.

God acts through many channels and works in many ways, but those of us who call ourselves Christians believe that we see most clearly what God is like and how God loves, in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As I said last week, the church is a community of people who believe and accept God's unconditional love as revealed in Jesus Christ. Baptism is a sacred act of this community of God's people which we call the church. In addition to what I've mentioned, baptism has at least these further three aspects.

1. First, the church celebrates the fact that God loves this child quite apart from anything the child or his parents could do for him or her to deserve that love. We celebrate the divine order of events. The child is not loved because he or she is worthy; rather the child's life has worth because God loves the child.

Baptism is much more then dedication. In Baptism the main thing is not what we do but what God has done and is doing. It is a sign that Christ claims all people as his own and that he has redeemed us to a new way of life. That is why we baptize children as well as adults. We do not baptize them because we or they have faith. We do not baptize them in order to make them children of God or to get them into heaven. We baptize them because they are already God's ch;ildren. The water of baptism declares that they are already entitled to all God's mercies available to all people in the passion of Christ.

This is the way Jesus approached all people. He did not wait for them to grow up or to set straight their lives. He reached out to them as they were, taking children in his arms and inviting all manner of people to dine with him.

Baptism then is an act of rejoicing and thanksgiving because God takes the initiative in coming to us. The brightness of baptism is the joy of knowing that God loves this infant and offers it the possibility of living as God's child.

Some argue against infant baptism because they say an infant has no choice in the matter. Of course the infant doesn't. He or she is a child of God whether or not he or she is aware of it. Furthermore, no one ever has a choice in one's birth. That choice always rests with another. My parents chose to give me physical birth. God chose to give me spiritual birth. What I do about one or the other is something else.

So it is that baptism proclaims the good news that you have a name, and that God knows your name. You are a child of God.

2. Secondly, in baptism the individual being baptized is publicly received into a community of Christians who pledge that they will express God's love to this person in concrete ways. We say it each Sunday that we perform a baptism--" On behalf of the whole Christian Church, we now receive this child into our love and care. We promise that we will uphold these parents in the fulfillment of their vows and provide for all children full opportunities for Christian growth and nurture."

One reason we have a Sunday Church School, youth choirs, youth groups and a 9th grade church membership class is to put into practice our part of the baptismal covenant.

Neither human nor divine love is ever a vague generality. Jesus did not dispense sweet sayings; he lived out God's love for people. He cared for people. The church exists to continue this loving and caring for people and for rescuing people from empty lives and for calling them to fulness of life in the Christian community. A persons is baptized therefore with the prayer that he or she will come to accept the Christian faith, and that he or she will be an instrument of God's blessing in this world.

There is no magic in baptism. The love of God becomes specific for an individual only in the concrete realities of life, including relationships with imperfect human beings. Of course, God works in many ways and God is not limited to the church to bring this about, nor is God's love as we know it in Christ restricted to those who accept Christ as Lord. Christian baptism, however, is an acknowledgement of God's love as we know it in Christ, and a reception into the body of people who gratefully receive that love and accept the charge to be agents of its continuing expression.

At the same time, Christians know well the weakness of their human fellowhsip, but we earnestly believe that Christ is nevertheless present and active among us as a congregation. The baptized person, no matter what his or her age, becomes part of the church--the Christian community in all forms and times and places.

3. In baptism, we pray that the child will be filled with the Spirit of God and that the child may know fulfillment and freedom of life as God's child. Christians throughout the centuries have found that their lives take on a new purpose and value through their relationship with Jesus.

Our fundamenalist neighbors are forever using the phrase, "Born again." It's Biblical, although in that form, found in only one brief passage. And even then, it derives from a Greek word that can be translated as "again," but also "from above." It's a play on words and as such there is small doubt in my mind what was the intent of the Biblical author of John's Gospel.

You must be born. . . first of all of human flesh, from your mother's womb, from the waters of the ancients seas; and you must be born from above, as in the waters of baptism, and discover that you are not only a child of the flesh, but a child of the spirit also. You are more than simply flesh and blood. You are more than just a biological being. God's spirit dwells in you. You are a child of God. God knows your name. And that's why we baptize. Amen.