Mistaken Identity

By Rev. Todd Farnsworth

Luke 3:15-17

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. 16 John answered them all, “I baptize you with[a] water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with[b] the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” 21 When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened 22 and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

The folks who were coming to be baptized were from Qumran. The community was made up of Jewish Essenes who were committed to a fairly monastic life of poverty, charity, and witnessing the arrival of the Messiah. They had been waiting and watching and as John the Baptist proclaimed his ministry of Repentance and Change through baptism, they believed that
God had sent them what/who they were waiting for. His passion. His strength. His relationship with God was (in their experience) unmatched and they went to him with joy and anticipation “wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.” They wondered if he would restore Israel to its place of honor in the world. They wondered if John would be the One to lead them toward holy victory.

John, anticipating their hopes, corrects them. He says, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” Sure, John’s power to release people from their sins is great. He’s got a river of hopes and dreams at his disposal to help them along their way, but he knows that the physical washing away of sins; the hands-on act of dying in the waters and rising to new life, will be enacted by someone who has skills and abilities beyond his own. In fact, John goes on, this One who is coming will, “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” John shifts the scene from the present to the end times. To a final judgment. He moves the anticipation line into a more cosmic arena and describes the One who is coming as someone who can determine who is worthy and who is not. John speaks of somebody who will separate people into wheat and chaff, meaning that some will receive Heaven. Some will receive Hell. The worthy will be saved in the holy harvest and the others will be lost. The Messiah John waited for would make those calls. John’s Messiah would sort folks out by spiritual worthiness. Take a moment to consider, would you be worthy?
How disconcerting for people who answered that question with a “no.”

Fortunately for them (and for us!), Luke continues the story by throwing John into jail (the lectionary omits those lines, probably because the other gospels put John on the scene of Jesus’ baptism) and moves Jesus into position to show that John was mistaken, too.

“When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.”

Jesus appears (as Luke portrays it there is a time before John, John, and then Jesus. Only one player on stage at a time) and Jesus muddies the waters of the Jordan and even John’s expectation of the Messiah.

Note: Jesus does not come in with a spotlight on him. He is not a larger than life character in this scene. He is one of the many being baptized. He submits himself to the waters that everyone else has been dipping into.

He takes time to pray like everyone else has been praying, reflecting on their relationship with the Holy.

And while he is praying, while he is standing or kneeling there with his wet hair draped around his shoulders and his soggy robe tangled around his knees, “heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

It turns out that the scene is not about separating. Jesus’ baptism is about embracing. He is accepted. He is actively beloved.
It reminds me of the movie/book, *Big Fish*. I checked and it's available for streaming on Amazon. *Big Fish* is the story of a young man coming home to be with his dying father. The son tries to determine the fact from fiction in his dying father's life. Through a series of flashbacks the son moves from his anger and disappointment to a new understanding of his father. He comes to realize that his father helped many people throughout his life. He begins to understand that the fanciful storytelling his father employed (to the son's derision) was a way of protecting the people the father helped, and made the story more fun to listen to.

Throughout the book/movie the father refers to himself as a Big Fish. He is parched from so much time on dry land and needs to get back to the waters that brought him to life. As the son begins to see his father with love, he realizes that he wants to enter into his father’s storytelling, and in a scene that is both beautiful and heartbreaking, he tells his father about a heroic escape from land that involves the son carrying his father back to the waters, where he can live free forever.

If you haven’t seen *Big Fish*, I urge you to check it out. It is a great example of how mistaken identity can keep us from really experiencing the gifts of another person.

You know, the folks who were closest to the action of Jesus’ baptism were mistaken. I wonder about who we mistakenly identify.
• I’ve heard talk of people at the Mexican border being criminals and animals.
• I’ve heard word that people in opposite political parties don’t care about God or country. That they are “idiots.”
• I’ve heard that the people who will march in next weekend’s Women’s March are anti-semitic racists who hate men and want to topple our government.
• I’ve heard that folks who receive aid from the Ossining Food Pantry are not worthy, or they are cheats.

I hear a lot of identifying of people who I’m pretty sure I don’t know very well.

Maybe we’ve got it wrong.

I think it’s worth considering how folks might look if they were dripping wet with the waters of God’s change, and how hearing God declare them, “beloved” might change our relationships with them.

It turns out, Jesus didn’t come for the “saved.” He came to “save.”

It turns out, Jesus didn’t want to separate people into “wheat and chaff”, but he wanted to draw us together into a holy bundle of love.

It turns out, we may have mistaken his and our true identity as children of love in whom God is well pleased.

Amen.