

A mother was at home with her two young daughters one lazy afternoon. Everything seemed to be just fine until the mother realized something strange. The house was quiet. And as every parent knows, a quiet house in the daytime can only mean one thing: the kids are up to no good. Quietly walking into each of the girls' rooms and not finding them there, she began to get worried. Then she heard it: the sound of whispering followed by the flushing of a toilet. Following the sound, she soon realized where it was coming from. It was coming from her bathroom. Whispers, flush. Whispers, flush. Whispers, flush.

Poking her head into the room, she was able to see both of her daughters standing over the commode. Whispers, flush. One of them was holding a dripping Barbie doll by the ankles and the other one had her finger on the handle. Whispers, flush. Wanting to hear what her daughter was saying, she slipped quietly into the room. Whispers, flush. And this is what she heard: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and in the hole you go." Flush. (1) Let's talk for a few minutes this morning about baptism "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

One of the most confusing doctrines of our faith is the doctrine of the Trinity, the idea that God comes to us in three persons God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit or the Holy Spirit, if you will. To some, even within the church it sounds ridiculous that God exists as three persons but is one being.

Those little girls were right in one respect we do use this time-honored formula when we baptize people. The Trinity is an essential part of our faith. We even have a Sunday on the church calendar the Sunday after Pentecost designated as Trinity Sunday. I will say it is not a Sunday that many of us look forward to with any sense of heightened anticipation. The doctrine is a snoozer for most of us. Yes, we believe, but we can't get too excited about a doctrine that is so difficult to understand.

And yet we have this very doctrine on display in a beautiful way at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry on the day that he was baptized by John in the river Jordan.

John the Baptist, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth you will remember, was Jesus' cousin. John was in the wilderness preaching about the coming Messiah. John was an eccentric character, with his clothing made of camel's hair, a leather belt around his waist, and his diet of locusts and wild honey. Of course, maybe he was just ahead of his time. We could say he was into organic food and committed to a lifestyle of simplicity. Today he would be celebrated, not looked down upon for his unusual habits.

Actually, he was celebrated in his own time. He was a fabulously popular preacher, seemingly popular with everybody except Herod, who eventually put him to death. But that's a story for another day. John never went into the cities, the highways and byways; he stayed near the Jordan because his main purpose was to baptize persons who were repentant. In fact, that is exactly what he is doing as we open today's lesson: he was baptizing people in the river Jordan.

John's ministry and purpose, as we noted, was to prepare the way for the Messiah. His message was "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!"

The Jewish people were looking for a deliverer to make things right. They longed for freedom from the oppressive hand of Rome. Some of them thought that perhaps John was the person, the Messiah, God had sent to lead them to freedom.

Well, John did offer a unique kind of freedom. However, he made it clear that he was not the Messiah. "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

During one of his routine days when he was baptizing persons, John's cousin Jesus of Nazareth turned up to be baptized. This is the only time it mentions that John and Jesus met as adults, but since their mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, were close we can imagine that as cousins they saw each other quite often as they were growing up.

That is why, perhaps, that John was surprised to see his cousin among those coming to be baptized. John knew there was something special about Jesus. He admitted as much in Matthew's telling of the story. Matthew tells us John tried to deter Jesus from undergoing this sacred rite, saying in effect, "I need to be baptized by you. What are you doing coming to me?" Of course, theologians have wrestled for centuries with the same question. Why is it that the one we know as the blameless and spotless Lamb of God needed to be baptized? He didn't, of course. He was without sin. But we need to be baptized. He was setting an example for us. He also identified himself with the kingdom that John was announcing.

But, what I want you to notice today is how beautifully the doctrine of the Trinity is portrayed in these few words in Mark's Gospel: "At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"

Let's consider for a few moments how God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are portrayed in this simple story. Let's begin with God the Father. "A voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"

We see, first of all, the Father's love. God sounds like a proud Papa, doesn't he? "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

If I were to ask you to list the characteristics of God, you would probably give me some fifty cent words like omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. God is all powerful, God is all knowing and God is present everywhere. And, of course, you would be right. But in Jesus' mind, all of these are dwarfed by the truth that God is love.

"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

You have heard me say before that this is an affirmation that I wish every child on earth could hear without equivocation from his or her parents: "You are my son, you are my daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." What a difference it would make in the world if every parent would affirm his or her child like that. I suspect we would see crime drop, delinquency drop, even terrorism disappear.

Can you imagine a world in which every child knew for certain that he or she was loved? Can you imagine a world where no young person felt the need to act out in destructive ways in order to gain parental attention or approval? At heart this is the solution to the world's deepest and most tragic problem, the emptiness and loneliness that drives people to despair: "You are my son, you are my daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Baseball great Cal Ripkin, Jr. was quoted saying something about parental love sometime back. "Growing up, 'I love you' wasn't spread around too much in our household," Ripkin said. "Not that it wasn't meant. I could tell every time . . . my dad told me . . . he loved me without saying it. It's just the way things were then.

"That part is different in my family. I want my kids to hear it. I tell them, 'I love you no matter what,' which means, 'Whether you're good or bad, happy or sad. It doesn't matter whatever you are. I love you. Unconditionally. Always.' It all goes back to security and telling them you'll always be there for them."

Then Ripkin adds, "Maybe you run the risk of telling them you love them so often that it loses meaning. I'll risk it."

I hope we will all risk it. Tell your children often that you love them and are pleased with them.

Of course, Jesus taught us that parental love is downright puny compared to the love God has for each of us as His children. God's love is a love that never ends. There is nothing God will not risk to win back His fallen children. In this story of Jesus' baptism, we see the love of God the Father.

We also see the humility of God the Son. This is a recurring theme throughout the New Testament. Christ humbled himself in our behalf.

Paul says it so beautifully in Philippians 2: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death even death on a cross!

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (5-11).

John wondered why Jesus came to him for baptism; theologians wonder why he was baptized at all. But this was the pattern of his life. He humbled himself to be baptized by his cousin, a rough country preacher, just as later he would humble himself to go to a cross, the very emblem of suffering and shame. But it was all for us.

Humility is a misunderstood quality. Some people we characterize as humble simply because they don’t think very much of themselves. They minimize everything they do in order to curry favor with others. And we like such people. They make us feel superior. But we do not respect them. Only strong people can truly be humble.

I like something that Norman Vincent Peale once said, “Humble people don’t think less of themselves . . . they just think about themselves less.” Did you catch that? “Humble people don’t think less of themselves . . . they just think about themselves less.”

Certainly that was true of Jesus. He knew who he was, but he did not let that get in the way of his service to the least and the lowest. He was the humblest man who ever lived only because he was the mightiest man who ever lived.

The famous missionary Hudson Taylor was once scheduled to speak at a large Presbyterian church in Melbourne, Australia. The moderator of the service introduced Taylor in eloquent and glowing terms. He told the large congregation all that Taylor had accomplished in China, and then presented him as “our illustrious guest.”

Taylor stood quietly for a moment, and then opened his message with a few heart-felt words. “Dear friends,” he said, “I am only the little servant of an illustrious Master.”

That’s humility, the kind of humility that ought to characterize every follower of Christ. It’s not that we see ourselves as a doormat for everyone to walk on. We know who we are. But we humble ourselves in service to others. In this story we see the Father’s love and the Son’s humility.

Finally, we see the coming of the Holy Spirit. We read, “Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove . . .”

Notice the Spirit descends like a dove. We have two accounts of the Holy Spirit descending. One is here – like a dove and the other is Pentecost with a great wind and tongues of fire. Descending like a dove is peaceful and almost unnoticeable, like in confirmation.

The Holy Spirit is the presence of God in our lives a presence that empowers and instructs, a presence that comforts and corrects. Like baptism Christ did not need for the Holy Spirit to come upon him. He was always filled with the Spirit. But we need the Holy Spirit. It is that Spirit that helps us be what God wants us to be.

There is an old story about a pastor who was greeting folks at the door after the service. A woman said, “Pastor, that was a good sermon.”

The pastor replied, “Oh, I have to give the credit to the Holy Spirit.”

The woman said, “Pastor, it wasn’t THAT good!”

Christian comedian and singer Mark Lowry says that aspiring songwriters will often come up to him, give him a piece of music and say, “God gave me this song.”

Lowry looks at the audience and says, “What do you do? particularly if it’s not a very good song.” He says, “Sometimes I want to say to that person, ‘The reason God gave you that song is that He didn’t want it Himself.’”

“After me comes the one more powerful than I,” John said, “the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

This is to say, quite obviously, that we need to be baptized by water but we also need to be baptized by the Holy Spirit.

There was an article in the *Chicago Tribune* by a writer named Jim Yardley. It concerns a great bridge that spans the Yangtze River in China. The bridge carries thousands of pedestrians across it every day. Unfortunately, a few of these persons use the Yangtze River Bridge to end their lives. Over 1,000 people have jumped from this bridge since it opened in 1968. In 2003, a man in his mid-30s named Chen decided this had to end. Since then he has spent his weekends coming to the bridge to try to stop people from jumping. So far he has stopped 42 people from ending their lives. “It is very easy to recognize potential jumpers,” he said. “[Such a person] walks without spirit.” (2)

What does it mean, “a person walks without spirit”? I believe you know. You can often see it in a person’s eyes and in their face, in their slumped shoulders and downward gaze that they are “without spirit.”

The psalmist wrote, “Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me” (51:11). That is a profound prayer. At some time in our lives we need to pray, “Come into my life, Lord Jesus,” knowing that this is the same thing as praying that God’s Holy Spirit will come upon us. The Holy Spirit is the giver of life. The Holy Spirit is the breath of God within our lives. All of this we see played out in the story of Jesus’ baptism the love of the Father, the humility of the Son, and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

“Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”

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1. http://day1.org/1191-in_the_hole_he_goes.

2. Contributed. Source unknown.