

Children

Today we are going to talk about something very special. It is called water. How many of you thought that water is very special? (Let them answer.) It is very special because it is necessary for us to live. We could not live without water. That sounds strange because you have never had to try to live without water, but if you ever had to live one day without water, you would know how important it is. Just think of all the things that you use water for in one day's time. (Let them name some of the uses of water.) You see how important it is. That is why we call it special. Very special.

Water is also used in something very special that we call Baptism. How many of you are baptized? (Let them answer.) Do you know why you were baptized? (Let them answer.) Baptism does a lot for you, such as forgiving your sins, making you part of God's world and promising you that you will live with God forever. But another reason that you were baptized with water was because Jesus told you and your parents that you should be baptized. Jesus was baptized. He asked John the Baptizer to baptize him, and John finally did it. John thought that Jesus was too good to be baptized by anyone, including himself, and he said so. But Jesus wanted John and everyone else to know that he was one of us, and therefore he had to be baptized also.

It makes you feel good to know that Jesus wants to be one of us. He went to the same river where John was baptizing others and Jesus was baptized with the same water that others had been baptized with. Jesus was trying to tell us that, with him, sin died. If we are baptized in water, then our sin is drowned and it cannot live. That is one of the reasons that you were baptized. Your sins were drowned and they died, and you became one with Jesus.

Water can be used for lots of things, but the most important thing that it is ever used for is to become one with Jesus in our baptism.

I don't know if you will think about your baptism every time you use water, but if you think about it once in a while, it will be good. Jesus came to John the Baptizer to be baptized so that he could be with us and we could be with him, John baptized him with the water from the river and we have chosen to be like him ever since.

C.S.S. Publishing Company, [THE ONE-HANDED CLOCK](#), by Wesley T. Runk

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It was one of the greatest openings of any TV series, well before Tom Cruise took over the role in the cinema versions. The leader receives a message to go to some hidden place where a pre-recorded tape will be found. He places the tape in a recorder and listens. Some complicated scenario is spelled out, along with the difficulty of solving it. Then come the words: "if you should accept this mission. . . ." From then on we learn how some mission impossible could be, indeed, accomplished by skill and daring.

It smacks against our piety to think of Jesus as accepting a mission. We think of him as destined to do what he did, that everything was worked out by his Father and spelled

out by angels long before Jesus was even born. But it is one thing to anticipate a mission and quite another thing to accept and accomplish it. Just look at the recent history of the Redskins, for example; or how our elected presidents take their mission in very different directions.

Jesus does not get baptized in a vacuum. In addition to all the political and social events that surrounded his life, from the occupation of the Roman army to the different spiritual directions taken by different spiritual leaders, we also have the tradition of Isaiah whose ideals and poetry seem to have stirred the Jewish people for more than 500 years. When the voice of the Father says over Jesus, "You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased," he is alluding to Isaiah. To be a son is also to be a servant.

The emphasis of Isaiah is truer to Jesus' ministry than some of the movies we have made about Jesus, even going back to the famous *The King of Kings*. Unlike the Jesus as magician or superstar which is the way media often presents him, Isaiah says the true Servant of God wins by working in quiet assurance. "The bruised reed he will not break; the smoldering fire he will not stomp out." The chosen servant of God will have a message that shakes the coastlands; he will be a light to the nations by working for justice and giving desperate people a reason for hope because God is working in their lives.

Jesus is baptized; we are baptized as well. Jesus seems to have deliberately chosen to be baptized so he could bequeath to his followers his mission. Certain groups practiced washing rituals; but baptism, as a sign of change and conversion, seems to have been an innovation of John the Baptist. Jesus takes John's radical sign and makes it even more potent. It's not a sign of preparation for the Kingdom; it's a sign of participation in the Kingdom which Jesus establishes by his ministry of meek and humble love.

We, of course, are participants in the Kingdom because we all have a part in Jesus Christ himself. This is what we say every time we come to Mass and receive his body and blood, that we want his mission to be our mission, that we want to be his body living throughout history. Sometimes you hear about people who want to officially get "un-baptized" and renounce their religion. I'm afraid a lot of people do this more unofficially by giving up the practice of their faith.

But we say the opposite when we come here and claim to be part of Jesus who this day is proclaimed to be the beloved Son, the anointed. We come and say that we want to get into the same water that he did, we want the Spirit to come upon us as it came upon him, that we are humbled to be called, as Jesus was, beloved children of God. When we come to worship, we are saying that the waves Jesus made when he went into the water have the power to sweep over us as well, even today.

Jesus' acceptance of his mission makes our mission, following in his steps, possible for us!

II

Anyone here ever been involved in planning a wedding? Have you ever noticed that there are so many details involved in planning a wedding that brides and grooms tend to get really stressed out in the weeks leading up to the big event?

Bride-to-be Cassandra Warren was so hurried to get things done that she accidentally sent an invitation to her wedding to a wrong address. The wedding was to have a Star Wars theme and she was excited about it, but this one invitation went astray.

A week later, the invitation came back in return mail. The mistaken invitee had included a \$20 bill in the envelope, and had scribbled this message on the outside: "I wish I knew you—this is going to be a blast. Congratulations—go have dinner on me. I've been married for 40 years—it gets better with age."

Warren sent back a gracious thank-you note, saying, "I am thankful for people like you still being in the world." (1)

We all know what it's like to get a phone call or text from a wrong number. We usually ignore it, or we text back a quick "wrong number" and we go on with our lives. But a few years ago, a story about a wrong number and a mistaken invitation went viral and touched many lives.

On Nov. 15, 2016, Wanda Dench sent a group text to her family reminding them what time they would be celebrating Thanksgiving dinner at her house. She didn't realize that one of her grandsons had changed his cell number, and so she accidentally sent the text to a teen named Jamal Hinton.

Hinton was surprised and amused when he got the Thanksgiving invitation. He texted back and asked who it was from?

Dench texted back that it was from "Your grandma." Since Hinton's grandmother doesn't text, Jamal knew Dench had the wrong number. He asked her to text him a picture. She did. Then Hinton texted her a picture. Dench is white. Hinton is black. She probably was not his grandmother.

After sharing a good laugh about the mistaken invitation, Dench then texted to say that Hinton was still welcome to join her family for Thanksgiving dinner. And so he did. For the last couple of years, Jamal Hinton has joined the Dench family for Thanksgiving dinner. A mistaken invitation has turned into a great friendship between the two families. (2)

In our Bible passage today, John the Baptist is giving an invitation to the people of Jerusalem and Judea to repent, confess their sins and be baptized because the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He directed his most demanding preaching toward the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious elites. He's saying to them, "Don't think you're too good for this! You'd better get over here now and get baptized and begin living a life that shows you've repented and turned back to God!" That's not exactly what he said, but that was the gist of his message.

So it's strange that John suddenly puts the brakes on when Jesus comes to him to get baptized. Notice how today's lesson begins: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. *But John tried to prevent him . . .*" Here John is inviting all kinds of people to get baptized, but when Jesus steps forward, he prevents him

saying, “I need to be baptized by you . . .” It’s like John the Baptist suddenly becomes John the Bouncer. “Hold it right there, Jesus. This invitation for baptism is for everyone *but* you.” Was this a case of an invitation gone astray?

There’s an old phrase that’s pretty common in England and North America. The phrase is, “Were your ears burning?” It means, “I was just talking about you.” It’s based on an old wives tale that if your right ear is burning, someone is saying nice things about you. But if your left ear is burning, their talk about you is negative or they’re planning evil towards you. This old saying goes all the way back to 77 A.D., when a Roman philosopher named Pliny wrote about it in his book, *Natural History*.

There’s a similar superstition in other countries. In Bangladesh, Japan, Vietnam or Greece, if you sneeze, it must mean someone is talking about you. In Estonia and Afghanistan, if you cough, someone must be talking about you. (3)

I could picture John the Baptist saying, “Hey, Jesus, were your ears burning? Because I was just talking about you? I was just telling everyone that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. That’s you. You are the true baptizer. I just baptize with water, but you’re coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. That’s why I’m so confused. Why would you be coming to me for baptism?”

And Jesus answers with the words, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” We’re not certain what Jesus meant with these words, but we know this is an important moment in Jesus’ life. Up until now, he’s been, for all practical purposes, anonymous. Just an average Joe. One of the guys, a tradesman, a carpenter. But in order to “fulfill all righteousness,” as the scriptures say, to show the glory of God and to follow God’s will, he is leaving his old life of anonymity behind and announcing his ministry. And this public baptism by John is part of his plan.

it’s interesting to see how God uses this misunderstanding between John and Jesus to show us what it means to be baptized as a follower of Jesus Christ. Let’s consider a few things that it means when we are baptized.

It means, first of all, leaving our old life behind. When we are baptized we are announcing to the world that whoever we were and whatever our plans used to be, we’re leaving those behind. We now belong to God.

Let me give you an example of someone who’s pursuing a new life. His first name quite ironically is Christian—Christian Picciolini. I say ironically because Christian spent eight years as a violent supporter and recruiter for the white supremacist movement. But while participating in a violent attack on an African-American man one day, Christian experienced a moment of empathy for his victim—a moment that eventually led him to repent of his racism and hatred and leave the white supremacist movement. Now Christian dedicates his time and energy to reaching people within the white supremacist movement and convincing them to give up the hate and prejudice and violence they preach. He also trains police officers and FBI agents in the methods and beliefs of neo-Nazis and white supremacists.

Journalist Scott Pelley from *CBS News* interviewed Christian on his new life. He asked him, “Do you fear for your safety?”

Christian replied that he receives death threats on a daily basis. But the way he looks at it is that for eight years of his life, he was willing to die for something that was wrong. Now he is trying to help pull people out of this hate-filled movement. Otherwise, he said he didn’t know how he’d be able to live with himself. (4)

Christian Picciolini gave up a life of hatred in exchange for a life of peace and reconciliation. And his commitment is tested on a daily basis by the death threats he receives. That tells us that when you commit your life to following Jesus, your commitment will be tested just as Jesus was tested in the wilderness by Satan right after his baptism. You’ll feel the pull of going back to the comfortable, self-centered life you once lived. But in your baptism, you died to your old life and came alive to the new life that reflects God’s Spirit and God’s will.

Margaret Burks, a former missionary from Tanzania, told of a baptism service she attended in East Africa. Each person came forward to be baptized by being immersed in a river as a symbol of their new life in Christ. All the participants came forward with joy, but one young boy really broke up the service when he came out of the water after his baptism shouting, “I’m alive! I’m alive! I’m alive!”

The missionary asked the boy what he was doing. The boy said he thought he was supposed to die in the waters. Hadn’t the missionary said that he would be “buried with Christ in the waters of baptism”? Yes, that was a part of the liturgical reading for the service. But the boy had taken it literally. The attendees at the service began to laugh, until the missionary said, “That child thought that baptism would kill him, and yet he was willing to go through the process.” Then he asked, “Would you have done the same?” (5) That’s a profound question: Would we have done the same?

New life in Jesus is not an add-on, like an app or an accessory. New life in Jesus is an exchange. You give up something in order to get something better. You die to your old life in order to receive new life in Jesus. There’s no holding on to a little part of it. There’s no negotiation for a better deal. That is the deal. In responding to John’s invitation Christ shows us what it means to be baptized—it means beginning a new life in him.

But it means a second thing, it means making that which has been personal and private public and social.

After his baptism Jesus began to preach and teach about the kingdom of heaven, to heal diseases, to set people free from demons. It would have been safer and more comfortable for him to remain in the carpenter’s shop, but that was not God’s plan. He was to take his ministry out into the world. He was to be a person for others. And God calls us to be used in the same way.

Many people fear that if they become followers of Jesus, God will call them to give up their jobs and families and move to some remote part of the world to serve as a

missionary in a place with no indoor plumbing. Not likely. I mean, anything's possible. God does call some people to exactly that kind of ministry. But for most of us, God calls us to use our strengths, our talents, our energy, our time, our money, our jobs, our relationships to share God's truth and healing and love and life right where we are. God's calling doesn't always take us to a new mission field; God's calling reveals to us the mission field that's all around us right now.

Zach Hunter was twelve years old when he studied about the slave trade in school. He told his mother that if he'd been alive in the days of slavery, he would have done something about it. To his surprise, his mother told twelve-year-old Zach that slavery was an ongoing international problem today. So Zach Hunter decided that ending slavery was his calling from God.

After much prayer and research, Zach started a campaign called "Loose Change to Loosen Chains." What a great name for his organization—"Loose Change to Loosen Chains." Since then Zach has spoken at conferences, concerts, public events, schools and churches in an effort to raise money and awareness to fight human slavery. He donates the money he raises to the International Justice Mission to use in their fight against the slave trade. He's also written a book on this subject that has been published by Zondervan. He's even appeared on *Good Morning, America* and was interviewed recently by *Newsweek*.

As Zach says, "I wanted kids my age to get on board to help. I want us to make history—and I don't mean to get our names in some history book, but to be known as a generation that did something for God, cared for the poor, and totally stopped slavery."
(6)

God's calling is not limited by age, socioeconomic status, gender or ability. The only limit on God's calling is our obedience. Our willingness to use every resource we have to share God's love and truth with others. Jesus was without sin, completely righteous. He didn't need to undergo a baptism of repentance. He did it to show us the attitude of obedience, faith, willingness that God desires from His children.

God uses this misunderstanding between John and Jesus to show us what it means to be baptized as a follower of Jesus Christ. It means, first of all, leaving our old life behind. But it means a second thing—it means making that which has been personal and private public and social. Many of us are introverts. It's difficult for us leave behind the comfort of our homes to proclaim Christ in the workplace, in our social relationships, in community activities. But that is where Christ is calling us.

Finally, in accepting John's invitation to baptism, Jesus is identifying with those he came to save. He is making peace between us and God. He is showing us just how far God's love would go to save His precious children.

There was an interesting report on the Internet recently about a young man from Brazil who identifies so closely with his favorite soccer club, the Flamengo, that he covered his entire torso with a tattoo of the team's jersey. From his neck to his waist, he has

tattooed on the stripes of his favorite team. According to this report, it took 32 sessions with a tattoo artist and over 90 hours to complete the tattoo. (7)

We may doubt this young man's sanity, but we can't doubt his commitment to his team. He was willing to invest his money, time and even his pain to show the world what he believes in. What are we willing to sacrifice to show our commitment to Jesus Christ? Does our life look any different than the lives of our family or friends who do not follow Christ? Would our colleagues look at us and say, "Oh, yeah, that guy is a Jesus follower. It's tattooed all over his life"?

We identify with Christ, but we also identify as he did with those for whom he died. Christ died for all people. If that young man from Brazil covered with tattoos wandered into our church, how well would he be accepted? It's human nature for us to recoil from anyone who does not fit our cultural norm. It was Jesus' nature to reach out to those the rest of society ignored or rejected. Remember says St. Paul, we were yet sinners when Christ reached out to us.

Jesus submitted to the baptism of repentance. He had no reason to repent. He was without sin. John's invitation was for everyone *but* him. But the invitation was not misdirected. Jesus needed to give us an example of a life that is completely aligned with God's will. He needed to show us what it is to go beyond a life that is personal and private to one that is public and social in order to make him known to the world. Finally, in his baptism, he identified himself with those he came to save. And he asks us to do the same.

1. "Bride Sends Wedding Invitation to Wrong Address and Gets an Amazing RSVP Card in Response" by Joyce Chen, November 2, 2018.

<https://www.theknotnews.com/bride-wrong-address-invitation-rsvp-card-28315>.

2. "Wrong text leads to unexpected Thanksgiving dinner" By FOX 10 Staff, KSAZ station, Posted Nov 16, 2016 <http://www.fox10phoenix.com/news/arizona-news/wrong-text-leads-to-unexpected-thanksgiving-dinner>.

3. Ears are Burning by Jess Jennison, April 5, 2014, <https://wordoriginstories.wordpress.com/2014/04/05/ears-are-burning/>.

4. "Rejecting hate, after spending nearly a decade spreading it" Scott Pelley CBS News interview. Produced by Michael Radutzky. Associate Producer, Lucy Boyd. © 2017 CBS Interactive Inc. All Rights Reserved.

5. Cited by Andy Cook, <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/sermon-whats-water-got-to-do-with-it-john-1-2>.

6. "Zach Hunter, Freedom Fighter" by Elisabeth Freeman, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/hottopics/faithvalues/10.17.html>.

7. "Brazilian Soccer Fan Covers His Entire Torso in Jersey Tattoo" by Dan Gartland, April 26, 2018 <https://www.si.com/soccer/2018/04/26/flamengo-brazil-fan-jersey-tattoo-photo>.