

“This Is Who You Are”  
Matthew 3:13-17  
Baptism of the Lord

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I don't typically begin a sermon with tabloid gossip.

But something struck me when I heard this week that Prince Harry and Meghan had decided to “step back as ‘senior’ members of the royal family,” deciding to split their time between living in Britain and North America.

No matter what else is behind that decision, it sounds to me that they don't want to be told how to live their lives.

They don't want to be told: this is who you have to be.

Do you know that feeling?

The feeling that RESISTS someone telling you—

this is who you are, this is who you have to be...??

In the Pulitzer Prize-winning play, “Fences”—

Troy Maxson is a garbage collector in the 1950s,  
as well as a former Negro League baseball player.

Troy is having difficulties with his son, Cory. Cory is a star high school football player with a chance to go to college on a scholarship. But Troy has reservations about his son pursuing football. Troy believes that he was kept out of Major League baseball because of the color of his skin, and he still sees the racism in professional sports...and maybe he doesn't want his son to experience the kind of bigotry that he did, or maybe he's jealous that his son might be good enough to overcome that bigotry and succeed in a way he never did...

Either way, Troy tells his son that he has to work his part-time job in order to stay on the football team. And when football practice keeps Cory from going to work, Troy tells the coach to remove Cory from the team.

This, of course, leads to confrontation between father and son, all of which boils over when Cory swings a bat at his father, and Troy kicks Cory out of the house.

By the end of the play, Cory has joined the Marine Corps.  
And after 6 years away from home, he finally comes back  
when he learns that his father has died of a heart attack.

Cory, though, is still MAD at his dad.  
And he tells his mother that even though he's home, he's not going to his father's funeral.

To which his mother says, "Not going to your daddy's funeral ain't gonna make you a man."

To which Cory says:

"The whole time I was growing up...living in his house...Papa was like a shadow that followed you everywhere. It weighed on you and sunk into your flesh. It would wrap around you and lay there until you couldn't tell which one was you anymore...I've got to find a way to get rid of that shadow, Mama."

"You just like him," his mother says.  
"You Troy Maxson all over again."

"I don't want to be Troy Maxson," Cory replies.  
"I want to be me."<sup>1</sup>

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Why does this scene work?  
We know why it works.  
We all have ideas...about who we ought to be.

I raise the topic this morning because of our text.

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<sup>1</sup> August Wilson, "Fences," New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

We just heard Matthew's account of the baptism of Jesus. And according to Matthew, there's a small disagreement between John the Baptist and Jesus before Jesus is baptized.

Matthew writes:

*John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"*

But Jesus replies:

*Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.*

In other words, John does not get to decide who he will be in our text.

He will be the one who baptizes Jesus.

He gets told by Jesus—this is who you are.

This is who you have to be.

It may not sound like a big deal.

A small detail in our text.

But I think, in each of our lives, it can be a big deal.

Have you ever been told by someone else: This is who you have to be!??

It rubs us the wrong way.

Why does it rub us the wrong way?

Because we get taught from an early age, "You can be whoever you want to be."

When I was a teenager, I heard George Perles, the former coach of the Michigan St. football team—he told his players:

"Work hard, keep your mouth shut, good things will happen."

And that Michigan St. football team went to the Rose Bowl in 1987 for the first time in decades.

In other words, with hard work and discipline, you can be whoever you set out to be...

Speaking of college football, I understand that there's a big game going on tomorrow evening.

What do you think would happen if I told all the Clemson fans in our congregation, "So sorry—I had a divine revelation last night—God says, even though you've traveled to New Orleans, even though you've rooted for Clemson all your life, you have to root for LSU tomorrow?"

They would ignore me, right?  
Some might accuse me of speaking blasphemy.

What would NOT happen is this:  
None of them are going to switch sides!

When it comes to football—no one's going to tell you who to root for.  
No one's going to tell you: this is who you have to be.

Do you have that feeling in your mind and heart right now?  
That feeling of resistance to being told who you have to be?  
Good.

Let's look again at the baptism of Jesus.  
You see, at his baptism, Jesus gets told:  
**This is who you are. This is who you have to be.**

When Jesus emerges from the water, what does the voice from heaven say?

Does God say: I have an offer for you, Jesus, about the way you might want to live your life. The upside is there will be healing and preaching and miracles and you'll change the world forever. Of course, there's this downside, called suffering and the cross, but the upside is really, really good.

What do you think, Jesus? Will you be my beloved Son?

Is that what God says?  
That's not what God says.  
God says:

*“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”*

Do you see what’s going on?  
 God says to Jesus, when he’s coming out of the water: my beloved child,  
**THIS IS WHO YOU ARE.**

Has someone ever told you that?  
 This is who you are...and when they said it, it wasn’t a bad thing.  
 It was a helpful thing.

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I’m reminded of a conversation I had shortly after graduating from college.

I was serving with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps as a paralegal for a poverty law agency, trying to decide whether I wanted to go to law school. At that time, I was 22 years old, and becoming a pastor was NOT on my radar screen.

Over the Christmas break that year, I went back home to Michigan and had lunch with the pastor of my home church.

“How do you like what you’re doing?” he asked.  
 “It’s ok,” I said. “I like this, I don’t like that.”  
 “You don’t sound terribly excited,” he said.

“Well...I just don’t know what I want to do next year. Do I go to law school, spend thousands of dollars? I don’t know if I want to practice law, or what kind of law I would find satisfying.”

Now at this point in the conversation, most pastors take the approach of being very pastoral. What do you like about law? What reservations would you have? What gifts do you think God has given you? In other words, ask good questions, don’t provide answers, let someone like me figure it out for myself.

My pastor took a very different approach.  
 He said to me: “You need to go to seminary.”  
 To which I replied, “I need to do what??”

“You need to go to seminary,” he said.  
 “You’re called to be a pastor, I can see it, I’ve seen it for years.

You need to go to seminary.”

So I said something like, “There’s no way in heck that I’m going to seminary.”

But my pastor was PERSISTENT. After that lunch, he sent me an application form. And before I knew it, I had filled out the form, the decision was made, and I was on my way to seminary the following fall.

Do you see what I’m getting at?

If my home church pastor had just said: figure it out for yourself...

If he hadn’t told me over lunch:

“Ben, THIS is who you are...”

well, I don’t know if I’d be standing here today.

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Is it BAD NEWS when someone tells you, “This is who you are!?”?  
It can be, right?

When an immigrant or a refugee gets told that they don’t belong here because of their skin color, or their religion, or their politics, or simply because they weren’t born here—it’s not a blessing for someone to say:

“You’re not one of us, because THIS is who you really are.”

I’m not talking about those times.

I’m talking about the times when all of us need to be reminded of who we really are. When we just might forget the identity God has given us in our OWN baptism.

A number of years ago, a Presbyterian pastor named John Galloway lost his wife, Susan, to Lou Gehrig’s disease, to ALS.

Afterward, he spoke to some friends about the experience.

One of his friends recalls what John Galloway said:

“John said that [his wife’s] body had deteriorated slowly, inexorably, but not her spirit—not ever. Near the end, when she was paralyzed completely, unable to speak, communicating by typing with one finger on her computer, their friends decided to have a party [for her].

“They ate and drank and told stories and laughed and cried and each person said what they wanted to say to Susan and about Susan. At the end of the evening, before her guests left, she typed on her computer screen so they all could read:

**This has been the best year of my life . . . to know how much you are loved.”<sup>2</sup>**

Wait—what??

I would’ve thought she would say it was the WORST year—ALS, getting sick, watching her body fade.

She said it was the best year.

Because all her friends had said THIS IS WHO YOU ARE...

You are not your disease.

You are Susan. You are deeply, deeply loved!

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Has that ever happened to you?

Has someone ever reminded you of who you really are?

It’s what happens during baptism.

In our baptisms, God tells us that no matter what difficulty we are dealing with, no matter what uncertainty you are going through—do not fear, God says. You are my child...

I will always be with you, because you belong to me!

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<sup>2</sup> As told by the Rev. Dr. John Buchanan in his sermon, “Grasped By the Power of Love,” preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, January 11, 2004.

You see, the baptism of Jesus is instructive for ALL of us.

At his baptism, Jesus is told who he is:

*“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”*

But I think as Jesus reflected on those words throughout the next few years, I think he heard more than the assurance that God would always love him.

The first part of that statement—“This is my Son, the Beloved”—that’s an echo of Psalm 2, which is a royal Psalm, to be used at the coronation of Israel’s king...and Jesus would have recognized that.

And the second part of the statement—“...with whom I am well pleased,” that’s an echo of Isaiah 42, the text we heard today, which is known as a “servant song” in Isaiah....and Jesus would have recognized that too.

At his baptism, Jesus is told by God that he will be a king, royalty, God’s beloved Son. But he will be a king who serves. He will be a king who suffers.

And that places both a calling and a blessing in Jesus’ life.

Which I think is true not just for Jesus.

But for us as well.

That mixture of calling and blessing that comes with baptism...have you ever thought about that?

Anne Tyler once wrote a novel about a young man named Ian Bedloe. Ian is about to graduate from high school. He’s got a good-looking girlfriend who loves him. He’s footloose and fancy-free, and plans to go to college.

But then tragedy strikes the family.

Ian’s older brother dies, and his brother’s wife dies soon after that, and there are suddenly three young children (from his brother’s family) to take care of.

Ian’s sister-in-law had no family.

Ian’s family—they have become the only family for those 3 kids.



But Ian Bedloe is not the person I'm most curious about today.

The person who interests me today...is you.

Martin Luther once said, "Remember your baptism."  
He didn't mean, remember all the details of the day.  
He meant...remember, THIS is who you are.

The next time you remember who you are, and work for justice...

The next time you remember who you are, and go out of your way to work  
for people who used to be incarcerated but now must become part of society  
again...

The next time you remember who you are, and let go of a grudge...

The next time you remember your baptism, and forgive someone who is  
difficult to forgive...

The next time you dedicate your days to carrying  
another person's cross...

The next time you remember who you are,  
and live into the identity that God has already given you,  
what do you think?

Will it be a burden to you?  
Or will God bless you in ways that you could never see coming?

Amen.