

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, Jan 9, 2011
Rev. John Tapscott

"A DECLARATION OF IDENTITY"

Matthew 3:13-17

For years when Canadians came home after a visit to the United States the main question we were asked was this - "What do you have to declare?" I remember as a boy of about 5 coming home with my parents and grandparents after a car trip to Florida. As we approached the border they began discussing what they had to declare. I became concerned. Somewhere in the States I had acquired a little red plastic toy tractor. I was worried that I might be asked where I got it or that it might even be taken from me. But I was not going to let that happen. I took the tractor from the dash board of the car and hid it under the seat. I suppose I wasn't the first person to try and fool a customs officer. And I was very relieved when we crossed the border with no problem.

Nowadays, the more important question is not what we have but who we are. Coming or going we must declare our identity. And the main way we do that is with our passport. That document is a declaration of identity.

The sacrament of baptism is like a spiritual passport. Baptism is a declaration of identity. It was true for Jesus and it's true for us. Let's start with Jesus. It's always good to start with him.

Here's the first thing. **At Jesus' baptism, God declared Jesus' identity.**

Matthew 3:16, 17, 'And when Jesus had been baptized, as he came up from the water, the heavens were opened...and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Who heard the heavenly voice? John? The bystanders? It's not clear. But Jesus certainly heard it. Now by this point in his life Jesus certainly had a sense that he was God's Son. But here was confirmation straight from heaven. At his baptism God clearly declared Jesus' identity, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

There are a number of names and designations that Jesus is given in the Gospels, but this is the prime one. Jesus is the Son of God. It was declared at significant events in Jesus' life - at his birth, at his baptism; and at that mysterious mountain-top episode when Jesus was transfigured and God said to Peter, James and John, "This is my Beloved Son, with him I am well pleased;

listen to him!" Then there was Peter's confession at Caesarea Phillippi, when he declared, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." After Jesus died the earth shook and rocks were split, and a Roman centurion looked up at the crucified Nazorean and declared with wonder, "Truly this man was God's Son." And speaking about the resurrection, Paul writes, "he was declared to be Son of God with power... by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord..." Now do you think God might be trying to tell us who Jesus is? Of course. Let there be no doubt. Jesus is the Son of God. "This is my Son, the Beloved."

Let's briefly consider the relationship of father and son, especially the first-born son, in the ancient world. Much of this was true both in Roman and Jewish families. The first born son had a large degree of family responsibility, which is why he would inherit 2/3rd's of his father's estate. The father would teach the first-born son his trade and he would inevitably follow in his father's footsteps. Joseph and Jesus were both carpenters in Nazareth. The eldest son, once he came of age, spoke on his father's behalf and represented him. When the son entered into a business agreement, it was as if the father himself had made it. And should something happen to the father, the son would take his place, and provide for the family. We may wonder why Jesus didn't start his ministry until age 30. Well, we don't read anything in the Gospels about Joseph after Jesus was 12, leading us to speculate that Joseph may have died at an early age. So Jesus would have become responsible for Mary and the rest of the family before the came of age.

But Jesus was the Son of God, always and above all obedient to the Heavenly Father's will. And at the right time he went forth to fulfill the mission his Father had given him. That's why the voice from heaven said, "With him I am well pleased." Jesus the Son was not less than the Father; though he always acted under the Father's direction. In fact, Jesus' opponents said about him, "He was calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God." In his earthly sojourn Jesus stood in the place of God and acted with the power of God. The words he spoke were given to him by his Father. He was a perfect representation of God. So he could say, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." You cannot miss this when you read the Gospels. Jesus was and is the Son of God, not a son of God, not one among several or many, but the unique, the one and only, the irreplaceable Son of God. So God declared at his baptism. 'And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved..."'

Here's the second thing. **When Jesus was baptized, he was declaring his identification with us.**

Certainly he shared our humanity, but there's something deeper here. You

see, John was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But Jesus was sinless. He was always the well-pleasing Son. Jesus didn't have any sins which needed to be forgiven. He did not need to repent. Why then was he baptized? Jesus told the reluctant John, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus was baptized because fulfilling all righteousness meant doing his Father's will in all things. And if Jesus was going to save us from our sins, he had to identify with sinners. When Jesus was immersed in the waters of the Jordan he was declaring his identification with us, making himself one with us. This identification with sinners continued throughout his ministry. Jesus hung out with prostitutes, tax-collectors, undesirables, law-breakers. Not that Jesus ever sinned, but he identified with them and with all of us in order to save us. For only the one who identifies with us can truly help us. Paul says that, "he who knew no sin became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God..."(in other words, that we might be forgiven, justified, saved and given eternal life.) Jesus referred to his own death as a baptism of suffering.

Over the holidays I watched a classic movie - *The Days of Wine and Roses* from the early 60's starring Jack Lemmon and Lee Remick. It portrays a middle-class American couple, Joe and Kirsten, as they spiral downward into full-fledged alcoholism. It's compelling but hard to watch. At the end we are left hanging as to whether Kirsten will the battle with the bottle, but Joe finally does, though it means that he and Kirsten have to live apart. And the way Joe won out was through the continued interventions of an AA member named Jim who had been an alcoholic himself for 12 years but had now been dry for 14 years. The rest of us would have lost patience with Joe, but Jim, having been there himself, knew exactly the approach needed. He identified with Joe, and was almost a Christ figure to him. The one who was broken can best help those who are broken.

Now it's a bit different because Jesus was never a sinner himself. Yet he identified completely with sinners and allowed himself to be broken by our sin in order to save and heal us who are wounded and broken. At baptism Jesus declared his identification with us.

Finally this. **Baptism declares our identification.**

At baptism God declared to you and to me, "You are my beloved child." This is not a status we earn, it's conferred on us by grace, which is why we believe in infant baptism. God chooses us before we chose him. And God promises to be our God, to hold us, to love us, to surround us with grace, and to keep prodding us to confess Jesus as Lord, and to grow in His image and service.

Who are you? If you are baptized and call Jesus your Lord, you are a son or a daughter of God, not just now, but forever. All the blessings and promises of God's eternal Kingdom are yours. You can go into the world and declare, "I am a Christian. Through Jesus the Son of God, I am a child of God. I am loved and loved eternally."

These lovely words from Isaiah 42 could have been spoken by God at our baptism, "I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand, I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations." Now these words were fulfilled in Christ, but they are God's promise and calling to us, too. At baptism, God covered us with the garments of righteousness. He took us by the hand. He promised to keep us and to be our God. He calls us and gives us to be a light in our community and our world.

A theology professor named Stanley Hauerwas opened one of his courses by reading a letter from a parent to a government official. The parent complains that his son, who had received the best education, gone to the right schools, and was headed for a career as a lawyer, had become involved with a strange religious sect which seemed to have a great deal of control over his life. The parent pleads with the government official to do something about this strange group. "Who is this letter describing?" Professor Hauerwas asked his class. Most thought the letter was describing the Moonies or another cult. Actually, it was a letter from a third century Roman parent concerning a group called the Christians.

Christians have always recognized that we are different, that we are called to be salt and light in the world. The mind of Jesus is growing in us. The love of Jesus is taking hold of us. At baptism, God gave us our identity as his own beloved children, and calls us to so identify with Him, that others see in us what it means to love and follow Jesus.

Martin Luther, the church reformer, was baptized as an infant as most of us were. Yet he looked back at his baptism as a defining moment in his life. When he was tempted or felt great stress or fell into despair, he would take a piece of chalk and write on his table, "I have been baptized!" As he wrote that, he experienced the strengthening, forgiving, saving love of God in Jesus Christ.

Never forget who you are. You have been baptized. And baptism declares your identity. "You are beloved child of God."