

Holy Macaroni (and Other Mistakes)

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Preaching on:
Matthew 3:13–17

In the early fourth century, the Roman Empire transitioned from being a pagan empire to being a Christian empire. And it did that mostly through the leadership of Emperor Constantine. He became the emperor of Rome very early on in the fourth century. I think it was like 304 CE, and then he converted to Christianity in 312 CE. And this is one of the biggest milestones in all of Christian religion. Our history after this point is completely different than it would've been if Constantine hadn't converted and if he hadn't transitioned the Roman Empire into being a Christian empire.

Even though he converted in 312 CE, Constantine was not baptized until 337 CE while he was lying on his deathbed. Isn't, that's strange? Why would he do that? Well, it seems that Emperor Constantine

was under the impression that if baptism was for the washing away of sins, and you could only do it once, he had better save it for the very last possible moment in order that nothing might be missed. His fear was that if he did it too early, and then he committed some sins along the way (as we're all bound to do) that he might not properly repent for them. And after all his efforts of transitioning the whole empire to Christianity, he still may find himself in hell.

That's a pretty interesting perspective. Why then did I baptize my son, Felix, this morning at the opposite end of life, right there at the very beginning? If Constantine was right, why would we baptize babies? I remember very distinctly as a child, one of my best friend's fathers, my best friend asked him, "Dad, why did we go to church and why was I baptized and why do we do all this stuff?" And my friend's father said to him, "Well, I don't know if I really believe it all, but, you know, just in case, just in case!" And that is sometimes the answer we get when we ask, well, why do we baptize children as babies? Well, just in case, in case anything happens, we don't want them to be unbaptized and then be stuck in some sort of limbo or purgatory, or not be able to go onto heaven. So, just in case we'll do it nice and early.

I think that Constantine was wrong, and I think my friend's dad was wrong. I don't think that baptism is about how you die, the state you're in when you die. I think baptism is all about the way you live your life. And that's why I baptized my son right here at the very beginning of his life. Baptism, I don't think, is a ticket to heaven. I don't think everybody who's ever been baptized is going to make it all the way. And I don't think that those who haven't been baptized are hopelessly doomed. I believe that baptism is one specific form of God's amazing grace to imperfect people living imperfect lives in an imperfect world. And thank God for that.

I believe that being spiritually healthy means living a life where you are able to reflect on your own foibles and shortcomings and imperfections and mistakes, and to own them and to move forward and to try and do better. Yeah? At the same time, I believe that being spiritually healthy means not getting stuck or mired in guilt and shame that strangles your heart, that doesn't let you go and doesn't let you progress in this life. How do we do that? How do we raise children who will be compassionate, and reflective, and kind, and own their mistakes, and do better, and yet, who will not be overwhelmed with shame and guilt?

I believe that one of the answers to that is baptism. It's interesting. When we look at Jesus' baptism from our scripture reading this morning, why was Jesus baptized? This is a question that has plagued theologians for a long time because Jesus was fully human, but he was fully God. And traditionally the answer is that Jesus was perfect. He was sinless. He never sinned. He never did anything wrong. So then why was he baptized? And the answer has kind of been, well, he did it just to be a good example for all of us, all of us sinners. And I'm not going to, I'm not going to challenge whether or not Jesus was completely sinless if he never did anything wrong in his entire life. Let's just accept that. Let's grant it that the Orthodox view is a hundred percent correct and Jesus never did a thing wrong because he

was fully God.

But Jesus was also fully human. And I know, I know. And you know, too, that being fully human means living a life where sometimes you just feel rotten about stuff. You don't feel like you're good enough. You make little mistakes, you stub your toe. People get mad at you, even though it's not your fault, right? You feel bad about yourself, you feel inadequate, you have regrets. You become a perfectionist and you say, "Ah! I didn't do it perfectly! I didn't do it exactly the right way." And I think that Jesus, even though he was without sin, because he was fully human, experienced that same range of emotions that all of us feel around mistakes and regrets and worries about our adequacy and how good we are. And I believe that's why he chose baptism for himself. Not because baptism washes away the sin. It does. But because baptism is also meant to wash away the guilt and to readjust us spiritually to live in relationship to our frailty, to our humanity, in a positive and healthy way.

Maybe we've got it all wrong. You know, often we believe that our humanity is what separates us from God. All this human stuff, all this frailty, all this imperfection. Well, that's one perspective. But the other perspective, the perspective of Christmas and Epiphany is that God meets us here in our humanity. God meets us in our brokenness. You know, as a minister, I've often asked people, you know, when did you feel God most strongly in your life? It's one of those questions I like to ask people to elicit a response. Oh, and how many answers I have heard to that question! And I can tell you that none of them sounded like this: "Well, everything was going great. I was on top of the world, man. I was successful and I was healthy. And boy, what a life I was leading. And while I was there just swimming at the top of the world, having a ball, I just suddenly felt like, yeah, God. And that's how I found God." That's just never the story. When you ask people, "When did you feel God most strongly in your life? When did you first connect with God?" it's usually a story somewhere down near rock bottom. It's about a loss. It's about an addiction. It's about human pain and suffering and frailty and brokenness. And in that moment, that's when God showed up to show us the power of the Spirit. And maybe if we don't have that experience, it's hard to really know who God is or how God intersects with our lives.

I'll tell you a short story. Back in 2011, I was working as a labor organizer in New York City. And I was wanting to move, transition out of labor organizing and the work I was doing as a faith organizer and get a job as a minister. The first sort of real job as a minister, I'd worked as a part-time as a minister, but a full-time job as a minister in a church. And I wanted to transition my career. And so I was applying to a lot of churches and trying to figure out where I was going to go.

And I kept getting rejections and not a lot of interest. And man, I was feeling really bad about myself. But there was this one church that I was really excited about, and a friend of mine had said to me, "Hey, you know what? I think that church up in Boston is gonna be the one for you. I think they're really gonna be interested in you." And I was feeling really depressed that night, and I said, "I don't know." I was working late. It was something like 11 o'clock at night. And just as I was walking out of the office, I checked my Blackberry—it was 2011—and I had an email from the search committee of this church,

and it was this amazing email. We're so interested in you. Thank you so much for applying. We really want to interview you. If you're about to take a job anywhere else, let us know because we want to speed up the process so that we can talk to you.

I mean, it was the most amazing, glowing, interested email you could ever get. And I remembered just that very night my friend had said, that's gonna be the church. And so I forwarded her the email message, and I was very excited. So you'll have to forgive my language. I just sent it with three words. The first word was "Holy," and the other two words were anything but holy. And I will let you use your imagination. Holy Macaroni, let's say. And I sent that off to her to show her how excited I was. And I remember the little hourglass spinning on my blackberry. And as I watched it spin, I realized I was so excited that I hadn't hit forward and put in her email address. I had hit respond. And so I sent Holy Macaroni to the search committee of the one place I was most excited about.

And so I immediately sent a follow up response. I'm so sorry. Tried to explain what I did, but man, what a mistake. What an idiot, right? And I will tell you that night was the dark night of my soul. I said, and I did things to myself that night that I would never, ever do to any other person. I was cruel, I was hateful, and I hurt myself. Why? I made a mistake. I probably blew it, but life would go on. I just felt like I was no good to anyone.

Well, the search committee was awfully surprised by my response, and it was a bit of a kerfuffle, but by a slim margin they voted to continue to interview with me, and they did interview with me. And when I finally walked in for my in-person interview, I sat down in a room with the search committee and the chair of the search committee turned to me and said, "So, Holy Macaroni!" And it broke the ice. And it turned out that that mistake that I made helped me to stand out to everyone on that search committee. They saw that I was a human being. They saw that I was not your traditional, no-fun minister. They saw that I was really excited about working with them. And all of a sudden, I was a standout candidate in their mind because of that stupid moronic mistake that I was beating myself up over. And I got the job because of that mistake. I am convinced of it.

And it was like God was saying to me, "Yeah, you're not perfect. You make mistakes. That's the way you are. That doesn't mean that you don't deserve good things. That doesn't mean I'm not going to put you to work. Forgive yourself. Let's go. I show up in the broken places." So beloved, to all of you, when you're feeling guilty or shameful, remember the promise of your baptism: Your mistakes do not define you. The God who enters your life through the cracks, that God, that loving God is the one who defines you.