

It's interesting to see how the different evangelists approached the problem of Jesus' baptism. And it is a problem, as I'll explain later. Mark's gospel shows us the whole event in three sentences: Jesus comes to John to be baptized, comes up out of the waters and sees the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove, then he hears that wonderful voice of love from heaven. Matthew, likewise, shows us the whole event but includes a discussion between Jesus and John beforehand. John didn't want to baptize Jesus, he said "I ought to be baptized by you!" Jesus talked him into it anyway.

Today's gospel, from Luke, doesn't describe the actual baptism. Didn't it seem like you'd missed something? He says "After all the people had been baptized, and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying..." He goes on to describe the Holy Spirit and the voice from Heaven, but the baptism itself is only mentioned in passing. It's like, "oh, and Jesus was baptized too."

The gospel of John, John the Evangelist, not John the Baptist, doesn't even come that close! It only hints at it. At one point it says "John," meaning John the Baptist, "testified further, saying, 'I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him. I did not know him, but he one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the holy Spirit.'" You want to say "Um, John, exactly when did this take place?" But the gospel of John doesn't tell us.

Many of the early Christians were a bit squeamish about Jesus being baptized by John. They told us about it anyway, so we know it happened, but there is kind of a stepping back or a reluctance to mention it in three out of the four gospels. Mark was O.K. with it but his was probably the first of the gospels to be written. Maybe it spawned the troublesome questions.

And the main question was "Why was Jesus baptized?" John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, one's personal sins. Jesus didn't sin, but to be baptized by John is to say you are a sinner. This does not make sense!

Or . . . maybe it does, but in a different way. The Son of God became human. Why? So he could sin and get in on all the fun? No! That makes even less sense. Jesus is God. God is without sin, has to be! Sin is a rejection of God. God is pure love so sin is a rejection of love! Can you imagine pure love rejecting pure love? That is silly! So Jesus, "God from God, light from light, true God from true God" would have to be without sin!

So why did he undergo a baptism for the forgiveness of sins? Let's go back to today's gospel from Luke. Luke emphasizes something the others don't even mention – it's there, but it's not mentioned: "After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying . . ." "All the people." Jesus wasn't the only one baptized. Think of it this way, Jesus voluntarily stepped into the water made filthy by the sins of all the people! He was immersed in it! He let it soak into him!

Gospel writers frequently have more than one meaning to their words. There's the surface meaning, and then there's a deeper meaning. Consider that "all the people" doesn't just mean the people that were there that day, consider that it actually means "all the people," including you and me! Jesus stepped into the water made filthy by your sins and mine!

Why would he do that? As Paul says in the letter to Titus "To cleanse for himself a people as his own, eager to do what is good." In other words, he wanted to free us from our sins. How? By taking them unto himself so he could take their natural consequence unto himself. Ultimately, death is the natural consequence of sin. As Paul says elsewhere, though he was without sin, he became sin. He took them on himself and had them nailed to the cross! God is pure love. Jesus is pure love. What could be more loving than taking the punishment for the loved ones?

But all that theology of it can make it all seem very distant. It's really very personal. Were you ever sick and one of your parents cleaned up after you? Parents do that because they love you. Jesus voluntarily steps into the filth you leave in the waters of life by your sins. He does that because he loves you.

He loves you! He knows you deeply, better than you know yourself, and he loves you deeply, better than you love yourself.

Do your best to love him back.