

Text: Matthew 3: 13-17

Title: Hank and Gert

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Hank and Gert were in a self-described mixed marriage.

Hank was CRC; Gert was from the Reformed Church in America. In repeating that old joke Gert would laugh, and with a twinkle in his eye, Hank would quietly chuckle and nod. Of course, that dynamic punctuated every conversation with Hank and Gert. She laughed; Hank quietly nodded.

Hank and Gert were members of Hope for about 50 years. They served as church janitors for a season. They raised children, grandchildren and great grandchildren at Hope. They weathered good days and hard. And they kept that same delightful dynamic: she laughed; he kept quiet.

Hank served in World War II and was reticent to talk about his experience. When he did, his stories were short – recounting service in the south Pacific theatre.

However, over breakfast at the Golden Bowl, Hank showed me two books filled with pictures of boats, planes, and platoons of men lined up like class pictures in a grade school yearbook. Hank said one of those was a picture of his company, but for the life of me I couldn't find him.

They all looked alike. They wore the same uniforms and had the same haircuts. Nobody was heavy. Nobody was tall. Nobody stood out. They were all white. And, they were just boys doing their best to serve their country. They were young men who had a sense of belonging.

HARP (Hope's Association of Retired Persons) would meet to eat cookies, read books, and tell stories. In those meetings I heard a rich oral history about the old Dutch west side,

and going to church,
and going to war,
and coming home,
and family,
and belonging....

Because there was always a deep sense of belonging. You belonged to your girl (or to your guy), to your family, and to your country. You belonged to your community, to your church, and to your God.

One way of to read the baptism of Jesus is as a story of belonging.

The birth of Jesus isn't recorded in all the gospels, but the baptism of Jesus is. You'll find it in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and it's alluded to in John. In writing the story of Jesus the gospel writers saw this baptismal event as essential to understanding Jesus. It's not incidental or tangential, but it gets at that central question of the identity of Jesus.

The mystery of how Jesus is fully God and fully human has been framed in confessions and creeds, but here it's set in narrative form. And, Jesus joining John on the banks of the Jordan is not a baptism of repentance to wash away the sins of a wayward-youth, but it has to do with Jesus finding his place with humanity and finding his place with God.

Consider....

There's no way of knowing how self-aware Jesus was. We don't know if his divinity dawned on him or how his humanity unfolded for him. There's no way of knowing if, or how, his sense of self was learned. What we know is the gospel narrative.

Jesus made his way over to the banks of the Jordan and slipped in among the people being baptized. John balked. Jesus affirmed that his baptism was proper to fulfill right relationship. John consented. And, then all manner of cosmic drama broke out!

The membrane between heaven and earth is split,
the Spirit descended,
the Son ascended,
and the voice of the God spoke over the waters:

This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.

Kathleen Norris writes of this scene.

The occasion of his baptism is so momentous that we are jolted all the way back to the first chapter of Genesis, as the separation of earth and sky that God established at creation is refigured. God breaks through in order to speak directly to human beings.

The Trinity is present: Creator, Son, and Spirit.
There's a separation of earth and sky and water.
There's a new Adam.
And the voice of God announces his blessing:

God saw all that he had made and it was very good.

Or,

This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.

There's kind of re-Genesis – a new beginning. It's a new picture of what God intends for humanity. It's a picture of right relationship. And, in that mystical moment Jesus learns, affirms, accepts, and lives into who he already is....

Jesus belongs to humanity – dunked into our death.
Jesus belongs to God – raised up to life and identity in God.
And, baptism is a sacrament of belonging – even for Jesus.

Hank and Gert were married for 65 years. When Hank passed away Gert told me that something inside of her was missing. It was as if something physical, something visceral, some part of her was gone. And then, remarkably, through tears, with a little more umph in her voice, she said, "But he didn't belong to me...."

It struck me as a remarkable testimony. Sure, maybe it's what you're supposed to say, or maybe it's just what you know after a lifetime of being together. But from deep in her heart, Gert said that Hank belonged to God. The Heidelberg Catechism frames it this way:

What is your only comfort in life and in death?

That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.... Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Dear friends, may Hank and Gert, and the baptism of Jesus remind us that faith is not a matter of getting it right, nor a reward given those who hold it together. And faith is not having all the answers. Faith is the deep trust that no matter what comes,
no matter what this world throws our way,
no matter war or peace,
no matter life or death,
no matter how we might fail or fall,
we are caught,
we are held,
we belong to God through Christ.

Eowyn Mae and Theodore Robert, you belong to God in Christ.

Eventually Gert's wits slipped away. She lived for years with confusion and dementia. Gradually her grasp of things eroded and her laugh was silenced, but her belonging never wavered. Even when she didn't know it, she belonged to God in Christ. The Canons of Dordt puts it this way:

So it is not by their own merits or strength but by God's undeserved mercy that they neither forfeit faith and grace totally nor remain in their downfalls to the end and are lost. With respect to themselves this not only easily could happen, but also undoubtedly would happen; but with respect to God it cannot possibly happen. God's plan cannot be changed; God's promise cannot fail; the calling according to God's purpose cannot be revoked; the merit of Christ as well as his interceding and preserving cannot be nullified; and the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be invalidated nor wiped out.

Dear friends, the heart of the gospel is that you belong to God in Christ – of which baptism is a sign and a seal – and that reality is unassailable.

Jesus is united with us in death; we're united with him in resurrection. Jesus is united with us in sin; we're united with him in salvation. Jesus is born the child of a woman; we're adopted as the children of God.

We belong to God in Christ.
You belong to God in Christ.
Thanks be to God in Christ.

This morning we baptized Eowyn and Theodore as a sign and seal of their belonging.

Of course, they belong to their loving family. And as twins, in some unique way, they'll belong to one another. They'll belong to teams and orchestras and clubs. Eventually they'll belong to those with whom they fall in love....

But underneath every one of those commitments and expressions of community, they will always belong to God in Christ. Unshakable, eternal, covenantal.

And therefore, it is incumbent on us – their family-family and their church-family – to help them learn of and live into that reality. As they grow into their sense of self-awareness they'll need to hear again and again, “You're my daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased. You're my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” In success and screw-ups, in guilt and goodness, in accomplishment and struggle they'll need to know that they belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to their faithful savior.

When they're empty of self and when they're full of self – they'll still belong to God in Christ. When they're confident and when they're confused they'll still belong....

Living into our baptismal belonging is a lifetime journey – a lifetime of learning, growing, and knowing what that belonging means. Martin Luther puts it this way:

In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life. Christians always have enough to do to firmly believe what baptism promises and brings: victory over death and the devil, the forgiveness of sins, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with all his gifts.

Hank and Gert belonged to God in Christ.

Eowyn and Theodore belong to God in Christ.

You belong to God in Christ.

May we live in, learn from, and love out of that reality.

May our days be marked by faithful gratitude for that grace.

Amen.