

God's Welcome in Baptism

Sermon Series: "Creating a Place for All to Belong"

Matthew 3:13-17

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We have all sorts of ways to be connected today:

How many of you own a cell phone?

How many use e-mail?

How many send text messages?

How many are on Facebook?

Let's not forget Twitter, chat rooms, pagers, blogging, pod casts, and lots of other media I've never even heard of.

So here's the question: In the midst of all these connections, do you feel like you really *belong* somewhere?

I mean, you might belong to a health club, a small group, Weight Watchers

You might belong to a sports team, the Rotary Club, Boy Scouts.

But...do you have the close friendships you really need?

Do you have friends who will help you when the chips are down?

Friends who will tell you the truth?

Friends you can tell your secrets to?

One twenty-something said that she found her way back to church because most of her relationships in the outside world were superficial. She told the pastor she wanted a place like the Cheers bar— *where everybody knows your name*—just without the booze.

Where do you belong?

I'm guessing that in our gospel for today, Jesus is asking that same question.

He's left his home in Nazareth.

He's said goodbye to his parents, his extended family, the local carpenter club.

And he's venturing out into the world.

What does he do?

He pays a visit to his cousin John.

John is down at the Jordan River.

He's baptizing people.

It's creating quite a stir.

Hordes of people are gathered.

Then Jesus himself decides to get baptized.

At first John pulls back. He doesn't know what to think.

He probably doesn't know all that much about Jesus, but he senses that he's somebody special. "You're coming to me?" he asks Jesus, "I should be getting baptized by you." But Jesus insists: "This is the right thing to do."

So John agrees.

He leads Jesus down into the river and puts him under the water.

It's a baptism by immersion.

It's a way of symbolizing a leaving behind of one's old life and the beginning of something new.

As Jesus comes up out of the water, a voice from heaven cries out, "You're my child. Welcome to the family. I take great delight in you."

So why do you think Jesus gets baptized?

People have been wondering that for years.

Even John the Baptist seems to be wondering.

The problem is that John's baptism is a baptism of repentance, but Jesus doesn't have any sin in his life.

So why does he go through with it?

My best answer? *Jesus is looking for a place to belong.* He's looking for some *one* and some *thing* to connect to. He's looking for a purpose in his life.

Jesus finds that purpose in his baptism.

Soon afterward, he begins his public ministry.

He goes to Galilee, and starts inviting fishermen and tax collectors to join him.

Pretty soon he has twelve disciples.

Then he's reaching out to the lame and the lepers, women and children—folks that normally don't get invited to anything.

Jesus is welcoming any and all to go with him on the journey.

"There's plenty of room," he says.

Whatever else Jesus' ministry is, it's about giving people a place to belong.

It all starts with God's welcome in baptism.

God gives you and me the very same welcome.

In the waters of baptism God reaches out to us with arms of love and says, "You're my child. Welcome to the family. I take great delight in you."

Now, one of the unfortunate things about infant baptism, for those of us who were baptized as babies, is that we can't remember those words. That's why we stop to celebrate our baptism on a day like today.

We need to be reminded who we are and to whom we belong

To help us remember, take a moment right now, turn to someone sitting next to you, and say to them: "You're God's child. You're welcome in God's family."

Not only do we need to be reminded of who we are and to whom we belong, we need to be reminded of God's purpose for us.

Like Jesus, one of our main purposes is to welcome others.

Hospitality is about creating a space in our lives where a person can enter and become a friend instead of a stranger.

Turn to someone sitting next to you and share of a time when someone welcomed you (one minute).

It feels good to be welcomed, doesn't it?
It makes us feel like somebody cares about us.
It makes us feel like we belong.

Our focus at Zumbro in 2011 is *To Create a Place for All to Belong.*

I'm very excited about this goal.
It's probably more important than we think it is.
After all, we've never been more connected in our world than we are today...and yet we've never felt more alone.

What can we do to make deeper connections?

The early Christians took their cues from Jesus.
They tended to the sick that no one else wanted to help.
They took care of refugees.
They welcomed the poor and outcasts into their communities.
In short, they offered hospitality to any and all because they believed that God had new and abundant life to share with everyone.

In many ways Christianity has gotten away from this welcoming ministry.
It's so easy for churches like ours to act like a club.
It's so easy to separate ourselves from the world.
It's so easy to separate ourselves even from other Christians.
Too often, following in the footsteps of Jesus has become more about *being right* than in *showing welcome*.
Because of it, Christianity often gets a bad rap in our culture.
And maybe we deserve it.

So what can we do differently? What can we at Zumbro do *To Create a Place for All to Belong?*

We can tend to the little things: friendly greeters at the doorways, regular use of nametags, user-friendly bulletins, introducing ourselves to someone we don't know, keeping the place looking neat and tidy—like we're expecting company.

This hospitality can go deeper as well: inviting someone we don't know very well over for dinner, making a prayer shawl for a cancer patient, walking with an addicted person through treatment, sitting in the hospital with a person who's dying.

There are lots of things we can do at the church. But please keep in mind: this focus is intended just as much for what we can do in the world.

We can make room in our lives for the co-worker everybody is gossiping about.
 We can show understanding to the harried young mother at the grocery store who's having trouble with her children.
 We can go out of our way to get to know someone who's different from us—how about a Muslim?

It's all starts with God's welcome in baptism. "There's plenty of room here," God says. "I've got new and abundant life to share with everyone."

Can you do this? I think you can.

Let me give you an example. On Wednesday I went to a lecture at the Mayo Clinic. I went because I was invited. Never underestimate the power of a personal invitation. Bob Jenkins, our congregational president, was going to give a talk on the subject of brain tumors. Since I had a brother-in-law that died of a glioblastoma tumor, Bob invited me to sit in on his lecture.

When I arrived at Mann Hall, there was a long line of people waiting to get in. Right away I felt out of place. I was coming from the other direction. Could I just cut in? Did I need to go to the back of the line? As people entered the auditorium, they were swiping their cards on the card reader on the wall. I didn't have a card to swipe. More awkwardness. I found out later they were standing in line for free food—if only someone had told me—I rarely pass up free food.

I wandered into the auditorium and made my way down the steps. I wondered where I was going to sit. Suddenly I saw a familiar face, Karen Schowalter, from Zumbro. Now, in case you don't know, Karen is a reasonably nice person. She waved for me to come over. I sat down next to her. And then, in an act of true hospitality, Karen gave me her dessert to eat, a Snickerdoodle cookie. It was a very nice thing for her to do. And even though the lecture on brain tumors was way over my head—that Bob Jenkins is one smart dude—Karen's simple act of kindness made all the difference in helping me feel welcome.

Friends, you can do this: *you can create a place for all to belong.*
 You can do it here at Zumbro.
 And you can do it out in a Monday-Saturday world.

What's at stake? So many people are looking for a place to connect. They're hungry for a sense of belonging, for a feeling of welcome, for a genuine experience of God's love.

When we create a space in our lives for people to enter and become friends instead of strangers, we are telling them that we care about them, that there is room for them, that they belong.

What do you say, are you ready to get started? Let's go out and have some fun. Let's create a place for all to belong. Amen.