

Luke 3:15-22

## **The First Gift: Grace for Us**

### *The gift of baptism as a gift of grace*

We have just finished celebrating Christmas with the joy of giving and receiving gifts. There was so much anticipation. One is always hopeful that the person who is receiving a gift from us will light up with joy by what they have been given.

As many of you are aware, this past Christmas was the first time in five years our little family was together. It was also the first Christmas we have celebrated with our granddaughter. All eyes were on Elliott as she opened her presents and let out bursts of delight. She is our beloved, with her we are well pleased.

We have Elliott and our children, but think of anyone that is close to you, it may be a God-child, a niece or nephew, your own child or grandchild, or just someone who is in your life that you love deeply, and you will get the sense of the words, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (v22). These were the words heard by those who witnessed Jesus' baptism. First the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus in the bodily form of a dove, and then those words.

This was the event of Jesus' baptism. It came in the midst of just another day around the Jordan, people coming out to see this one called John the Baptist. John preached a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. He did it boldly and loudly. Many people wondered whether or not he was the one that had come as the Messiah of the people. Someone to save them from the burden of the Empire. Someone who would make Israel great again.

But John unequivocally "answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire'" (vv16-17).

Well, John is a fire and brimstone preacher if ever there was one. With all that preaching and noise making, in the end John is held in prison. But at this moment, in the midst of all that John is saying and doing, Jesus comes along and lines up to be baptized with everyone else. Jesus does not need to be baptized, still there is much debate among theologians as to why Jesus comes to be baptized. We are not going to go into that debate now, but there is certainly much ambiguity on this subject.

Unlike the boisterous John, Jesus speaks no words at this time. Jesus comes, is baptized, and begins to pray. This will be a pattern for Jesus as presented by Luke.

Each time there is an important moment for Jesus, one will find him praying. Prayer connects Jesus with God, it is the discipline that keeps him in relationship with God, and is part of the Holy Spirit being present.

Jesus comes in a way that is subdued and quiet, and a distinct contrast to what John is preaching and teaching. Jesus will have his moments of anger and frustration, but that is not generally his way of interacting with others. Most of Jesus' life is in direct contrast to what the people expected of the Messiah. They expected a king to liberate them and topple over a government, but Jesus came to liberate lives from patterns of hopelessness and despair. Even on the day of his greatest triumph as he came into Jerusalem on what we celebrate as Palm Sunday, Jesus entered the city, not on a horse as would a king, but on the back of a donkey. Jesus was always turning expectations upside down.

For the moment, let's look further at baptism. We know that it is a gift. Baptism is about relationship and being named and claimed as children of God. It is about forgiveness, as John was preaching, but it is also about grace. Rolf Jacobson, professor at Luther Seminary defines grace as, "The free gift in which God gives all – eternal life, forgiveness, purpose, meaning – to human beings, who respond by trying to earn it."<sup>1</sup>

Pondering this brought me to explore Mastercard's *Priceless* campaign. "Priceless Cities, Priceless Surprises, Priceless Causes and Priceless Specials. Today "Priceless" has run in 54 languages in 113 countries"<sup>2</sup>, wrote Raja Rajamannar, the chief marketing and communications officer at Mastercard in 2016. These ads have been running for over two decades with the first one airing in 1997. This first ad was about a father taking his eleven-year-old son to a ball game. It goes something like this...

2 tickets \$20.00; 2 hotdogs, 2 popcorns, 2 sodas, \$18.00; 1 autographed baseball \$45.00; real conversation with 11-year-old son – priceless. There are somethings money can't buy, (by the way this is not a plug for Mastercard) for everything else there's Mastercard.

Well one of the things Mastercard, or any money, or act on our part can't buy is God's grace...and it is priceless.

Grace, the free gift, the priceless gift.

One of the ways we receive and experience grace is through baptism, the font, the water. Baptism is a visible sign of an invisible grace. There is nothing you can do to earn or buy grace, or to be forgiven, or to receive eternal life. All of this comes because you were first loved. You didn't have to do anything for God to love you.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobson, Rolf A., Editor. *Crazy Talk: A not So Stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Augsburg Books. Minneapolis. 2008. P78.

<sup>2</sup> Rajamannar, Raja. <https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/how-to-create-a-campaign-that-spans-2-decades-like-mastercards-priceless/>. Accessed January 12, 2019.

Theologian and minister Rev. Dr. David Lose writes, "...in Baptism God proclaims God's great love for us; calls, names, and claims us as God's beloved children; gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit...and then, because of God's love for us, God also promises to forgive, renew, and restore us at all times."<sup>3</sup>

This baptism thing is a gift. Grace is a gift. But in accepting the gift you open up your life to meaning and purpose that would not have been possible without it. It also opens us up to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Grace may be the first gift we receive from God. It is received in different ways, but one way is baptism. There are other gifts that through baptism are activated as we grow and mature as Christians. Baptism opens us up to various spiritual gifts. We are baptized into one body, the body of Christ, which we know as the church, but each of us is given various gifts for the work placed before us as individuals and as a congregation.

No one gift is more important than another. I have been given the gift of preaching, but that does not make me more important than the Sunday school teacher, or the greeter, or the choir member, or the pray-er in the pews. Each of us is specially gifted, and the community of faith needs each person's gifts in order to do the work of sharing the Good News of grace, forgiveness, and eternal life, with others.

In the coming weeks we will be looking at the gifts given to the church through its people. We will also be pondering how these gifts are to be used for reaching out to those who do not know God's grace. But for now, we ponder our baptism. For those who were baptized as infants, children, or adults, take time to once again remember your baptism and give thanks. For those who have not been baptized, this may be a time to consider whether or not you want to be baptized. I would love to have a conversation with you about this.

For each of us, trust and know that we are beloved children of God. You are now, and always have been, a child of God. Baptism is a gift given by God to those God loves. It is a free gift but opens up a world of possibilities for living with meaning and purpose.

Today as you leave the Sanctuary I will be standing at the font. If you would like, come forward and receive a blessing, touch the water, remember your baptism, or ponder the gift of baptism and what that might mean for you. Like Jesus, take time to pray. You are beloved and God's free gift of grace is being offered to you in the power and promise of the Holy Spirit. In Christ, with Christ and through Christ. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Lose, David. <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/01/the-baptism-of-our-lord-c-forgiveness-and-so-much-more/>. Accessed January 12, 2019.