

Recently I heard the story of one of our neighboring Amish families who took the train to Philadelphia for the first time. They entered a building and the Father and his son were just looking around, when a wall seemed to open, an elderly woman stepped in, and the wall closed. The son asked his Father, “What happened to her?” The father replied, “I don’t know, Son.” In a few minutes, the wall opened up again and out stepped a beautiful, 24 year old woman. The son said, “Dad, what just happened?” The father said, “I don’t know, Boy, but go get your Mother.”

This feast that we celebrate today, The Baptism of the Lord, is so pivotal in the life of Christ that it occurs in all four of the Gospels. The Christmas event, which we take such delight in, occurs only in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Whereas Mark and John basically take the birth of Jesus for granted, they, together with Matthew and Luke, seek to show his divine origin in this Baptism event, where “heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’” It is this Baptismal event that establishes in all four Gospels, the triune reality of God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All four evangelists seem to be saying that this, even beyond the day of his birth, is the most important moment in the life of Christ.

Have you ever considered that the day of your Baptism was the most important day of your life? I am sure all of you could tell me without even thinking about it what your birthday is. Can anyone here tell me what the date of your Baptism was? I’ll tell you mine, if even one of you can tell me yours.

Why, you may ask, do I say that the day of your Baptism was the most important day of your life? It was on the day of your Baptism that you became a marked man, a marked woman. Harken back, if you will to your early Catechism classes. Remember, you were told that Baptism left an indelible mark on you. It is the day that God marked you as his own. It was the day that God spoke His approval of you: You are my beloved Son, my precious Daughter; with you I am well pleased.

Now, a lot has gone on in all of our lives since the day of our Baptism. Some of it we’re not real proud of; some of it we’re down-right ashamed of; some of it may be so vile that we’ve attempted to stricken it from our minds. It changes nothing. That indelible mark is still on us. “You are my beloved Son, my precious Daughter; with you I am well pleased.”

You may have gone through or are going through all kinds of trials and tribulations—sickness, loss of loved ones, divorces, unemployment, financial loss, all kinds of heartache—where you have felt nothing but the absence of God, his mercy or his love in your life. It doesn’t matter. It changes nothing. That indelible mark is still there: “You are my beloved Son, my Precious Daughter; with you I am well pleased.”

Think of our Lord. He spent his whole life doing nothing but good for others—he gave sight to the blind man; raised up the paralytic; healed lepers; brought the dead back to life—yet, in the end, he was scorned and beaten and nailed to a Cross. He too felt the absence of God in his life, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me.”

Yet, even as he was suffering the most horrible and cruel and inhumane death, somewhere in the core of himself, he heard the voice speak to him, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” It was that interior voice that gave him the courage to cry out, “Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit.”

On the day of our baptism, we were given our identity; we were named, and that name has been recorded here on earth in the Church and for all eternity in heaven. Baptism tells us, therefore, who we are. But it also tells us whose we are, “You are my beloved Son, my precious Daughter; with you I am well pleased.

Knowing that—who we are and Whose we are—that indelible mark on our lives—makes us different. St John Paul II describes the result of Baptism as a mystical unity between Christ and his disciples, and the disciples with one another, like branches of a single vine.” Baptism is our initiation into the life and mission of Jesus Christ. Indelibly marked by God as Christ was: “You are my beloved Son, my precious Daughter; with you I am well pleased,” is God calling us to radically and profoundly take up the work of Christ in the world today.

How do we do that? In this Year of Mercy, it might be well for us to once again revisit the Catechism lessons of our youth. We can radically and profoundly take up the work of Christ in the world today by practicing what we learned as the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy.

In case you might have forgotten the Corporal Works of Mercy are to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. The Spiritual Works of Mercy are to caution the sinner, instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, comfort the sorrowful, bear wrongs patiently, forgive all injuries, pray for the living and the dead.

I can’t help but wonder if we Christians radically and profoundly practiced even just some of these Acts of Mercy couldn’t we defeat the evil, heinous acts of Isis? For instance, many of the adherents of Isis, we are told, are radicalized in prison. Couldn’t we make a difference in the lives of many with an active prison ministry in our parish? How about even just praying for the young people whose lives are filled with such hopelessness that they are attracted to the madness of Isis?

One of the most beautiful and profound works of mercy that went on in our parish for years was the work of Libby James who went home to the Lord just last month. She made rosary beads, but she didn't just make rosary beads. With each bead she strung, she offered it as a prayer that a young woman would allow the child of her womb to be born. She didn't wave placards. She didn't participate in demonstrations. She didn't rail against abortion. She just quietly strung beads and prayed. Each year, for well over 20 years, she would bring me two or three cases of thousands of rosary beads to bless, and then she sent them off to missionaries to teach others to pray the Rosary. In her quiet way, I believe that Libby James radically and profoundly affected tens, maybe hundreds, of thousands of lives all over the world. I wonder who will take her place?

Every time I baptize, I tell you my favorite part of the Rite is when I anoint the crown of the child's head, telling them that they now share in the priesthood, the prophecy, and the kingship of Christ. As I anoint them I tell the children that they are now princes and princesses in the kingdom of God. They're not just some cute words to say. They are expressing a reality.

With that reality comes responsibility. And that responsibility is to take up the work of Jesus Christ in our everyday lives. It is to live and act in union with Him and with each other to build up God's Kingdom here on earth, which Christ Himself has established.

The question before us today, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, is how well are we living our Baptism? Have we relegated it to just a Sunday-kind-of-thing? What am I doing each and every day of my life that speaks of my being marked by God as "His beloved Son, His precious Daughter"? Do I feel comfortable that when God looks at how I am living my life for Him that He can really be "well pleased"?

When we were baptized, each of our families was presented with a lighted candle—the light of Christ—symbolizing our call to carry that light into a darkened world that desperately needs it. Today God speaks to the heart of each of us, "Please carry your light, the light of Christ who lives in you, into all the dark places you encounter in your life, both individually and together. Never forget I have marked you. I have claimed you as my own. You are my beloved Son, my precious Daughter; with you I am well pleased."