

The Rev. Billy Cerveny:

So I've told this story a couple times down at the cathedral. I don't know that I've told it here. If I had, you might hear it again. It's okay. It's a good story. So that is, y'all. A lot of y'all know my father was a priest here. He was actually the bishop in North Florida years ago. And, when I was a little boy, we would always go to the cathedral during the Christmas time.

And on Christmas Eve is always these massive services. And everyone, you know, were there Christmas bests and ladies and hats and, you know, everybody was in there with the bells and smells and the vestments and, it was at the end of one Christmas service and everyone was filing out, and there was a bit of chaos going on.

And I was with my family, and I remember leaving my mother's side, and my father was standing at the door, and I remember going around the side of the of the altar rail and climbing up. If you've ever been to the, the, the, the cathedral, there's got this giant stone pulpit. It looks like a wedding cake. I used to think as a kid, and I climbed up into this stone wedding cake, and I remember crouching down and looking through the little latticework at the stone latticework and seeing the people in there swinging from a hook was a lavalier mic, and I remember grabbing this little microphone and blowing in it, going and hearing my breath

echo through the whole church, and I thought to myself, oh, this is awesome. So I grabbed the mic and in my deepest, loudest God voice I said, This is God, get out of my house.

And you can imagine the incredulity of my parents, and I can't remember exactly what happened next. But it's a story that's been told again and again and again. Now I'm telling it because it's a funny story. It's a funny story. And you know what's funny about it was a very, very few of you. If you were kids in that position, you wouldn't have done that.

And the reason you would have done it is, is, I think the sort of the relevant point of the story for this morning, the reason is, is why I felt the freedom to do that in that moment. See, the reason I felt the freedom to do that is my dad. He was the priest there. He was the bishop there, and I was his son.

I had spent so many hours in his office. I had gone to his office, and I had eaten 4000 Hershey Kisses off the little, you know, glass dish off of his desk. I had raided his secretary's supply closet and taken all the best pins I could find, and made chains out of paperclips. I knew every inch of the cathedral.

I knew every secret passageway I had climbed into that altar 4000 times. Or not altar that into that pulpit 4000 times. But the truth is, it wasn't my familiarity, or at least just my familiarity, that allowed me to do that. It was my sense of identity that allowed me to do that, because that was my dad's church, that was his turf, and I was his son.

And because it was his turf, guess what? It was my turf, too. At least I felt that way. And I remember that that identity gave me the sense of freedom. Like, I can do this. Of course, I didn't use it appropriately in that moment. But that's what identity does, doesn't it? Identity is this powerful thing in our lives.

Who do you think you are? What you believe you are, what your name is. What you, what you truly are at your most, most basic of things, it's important because it determines everything about your life. It determines who you, how you act, what you think your purpose is. It determines where you see yourself fitting in the larger narrative of the world.

My identity determines everything. And this is understanding like identity. And how important is it? Is a profound and it is a terrible truth. It's a profound truth. Because if you can begin to grasp the importance of identity, you begin to embrace something that of profound wisdom because it's you see how important it is. It's a terrible truth because of this.

Who are you?

What gets to tell you what you are? What makes you? How do you determine what that is? It's so slippery so often. Is it your job? Is it your kids? Is it how well you you've been a parent? Is it your. Is it the Jaguars? I hope not.

Is it your church. Is it how good of a preacher you are, is it how good of a fringe you are. It's tough. And for most people actually, and actually for all people, identity is this slippery thing. I can ask you about it. Yeah. Yeah, I get it. Until I try to push you and you try to define it and your identity.

It's like trying to nail Jell-O to a tree. You think you get it, but all of a sudden it just points. It disappears. Can't do it. And it becomes. What happens then is we get when that happens, when identity gets slippery, which it does for all of us, all of a sudden our life becomes this frantic search because our identity gives us meaning, gives me purpose, and I become this I.

I search frantically to start creating the thing that I think I should be. I need to be this or I shouldn't be that. And one day I'm this. And then and then my identity is as strong as my next failure. When my identity is rooted in those things, when it's dependent on me building it from the ground up, there's no rest in it.

There's no freedom in it. It's constant upkeep. It's exhausting. The beautiful thing about Jesus and the beautiful thing about the gospel, it came to do a lot of things. But one of the things that Jesus came to do is he came to redefine us. He came to redefine us. And part of that redefinition is that he establishes this new identity in us.

And this passage we just read in Matthew three is a beautiful picture of how that happens. And I want to kind of do just an old fashioned Bible study on this one, because it's a tight little passage, but it's a pinata. You can keep hitting this thing and stuff falls out and it will never stop falling out.

So Matthew, three verse 13, Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John to be baptized with him. And we'll stop right here. It starts here, says Jesus, coming from Galilee. This is an important detail, because Galilee, in Israel back in those days, culturally, Galilee was nothing. It was this little edge town, this edge region. It had no cultural significance.

It actually, if anything, people hated it because people in Jerusalem, they judge it. They felt they were the big city folks. They were the pure Jewish people. Because in Galilee it was mixed between Gentiles and Jews. And it was just kind of out in the middle of nowhere. If it were, if Israel were to be like saying I'm from Mayo or I'm from, I don't know, pick some map spot on I-10 somewhere.

It was the middle of there, and all of a sudden Jesus comes from this place. It's marginalized. But it's also marginalized. Is it prophetically significant because it was buried in the Old Testament, in the book of Isaiah, it prophecy that out of Galilee the Messiah would come. So there's this tension. Here's a picture of when we see Jesus coming out of Galilee.

It's a picture of a Jesus who both steps out of the ordinary. But it's also the extraordinary. He's prophetic. So he comes and it says it comes to the Jews, the Jordan and the Jordan. As you if you spend any time in Scripture, you realize this is not just some neutral place. It's dense with implication. It was the Jordan that God parted for Joshua to enter into the Promised Land.

The Jordan is always this picture of transformation and God leading you from captivity to freedom. We still sing songs about the River Jordan and the implication of it's a place of redemption and transformation, and it is packed with people. When Jesus goes there. Now, I want to unpack this a little more, that he that this person, Jesus, he comes out of Galilee and he walks among them.

And what we got to see here is this is that Jesus, the redemption that Jesus is offering, even in this one little part, with this one little sentence, we're seeing the redemption Jesus offers. He doesn't redeem us from above. He redeems us from within. It's a redemption of intimacy that the gospel. Every time you see Christ and His obedience, it's always a downward obedience.

It's never him coming on a glory cloud in the New Testament. And him just, you know, radiating beams of goodness for people to, to let land on their face. It's not that he never tries to save us from a distance. These are pictures that Jesus is committed into, descending into the muck, into the mire of our lives, into the inconsistent.

He can inconsistencies of our lives. He steps into the crowd of the River Jordan out of Galilee, and you realize that Jesus is committed to the tears stained details of your life in your marriage, or your kids, or your job, or just who you are, or that shattered sense of identity. When I was just talking about it, you're like, I have no clue who I am.

You're not alone. So our Jesus is downward Obi as he moves towards the contamination to redeem it. He's not this righteousness that floats above things. So Jesus meets John, goes and he meets John. John is the last of the Old Testament prophets. And John's a wild man. JTB, John the Baptist, dressed in his camel hair. And what immediately there's this tension that forms because John, Jesus comes to John and he says, hey, Jesus, I'm here, John, I want to be baptized.

And it's kind of this needle off the record moment. Like what? Why sea baptism? At this point, it's not a new idea. Let me tell you what baptism was they used to in, in the Jewish, temple and in Jewish culture, they had a ceremonial cleanliness was a very big thing to wear that you could enter into the temple, you had to be ceremonially clean.

That means there are certain things you couldn't eat, certain things you couldn't do, certain health conditions you couldn't be in, certain things you couldn't touch. But there's also these rituals that you went through. And they had these things called mikvah. Mikvah, where these big ceremonial baths. And they had staircases on one side and staircases on the other.

And what you would do in the mikvah is you would come and you would walk down the staircase and you would go down in this ritual of this, this act of ritual purification, and you would come out the other side. And people did this was very familiar to them during this time. And what John was doing, what John the Baptist was doing, he was taking this, this mikvah, this ritual of the mikvah, and he was redefining it.

He was reorienting it. It's not just about ceremonial cleansing. It's not just this kind of car wash you go through so you can go into the temple. What are you saying? This is about your heart. Repent. You got to see. You got to see the fallenness of yourself, the brokenness of yourself, the inability of yourself, the contradictions of yourself, the need of a of a merciful God.

And you. You have to see that. And when you walk in, you walk into the water of it and you come out someone who is repentant, crying out for mercy because you're a sinful person. And all of a sudden Jesus comes into the mix and Jesus says, I want to be baptized. And John is like, what? How? Why do you want to be baptized?

And it's even for us. Why would Jesus be baptized? Why would the one sinless person have to go through this ritual of repentance? He's sinless and you feel the tension there, right? So does John the Baptist. Verse 14. John says John would have prevented him, meaning John said he was saying, no, no, no, no, no, I need to baptize you.

And do you come to me? And the way this is written is it isn't in this polite hesitation like, oh, Jesus, are you sure about this? This seems a little weird. It's the Greek imperfect, which means it's an ongoing action, which means that John kept resisting. He said, no, no, this is not right, that you would do this.

It's not right. You're the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. You're the Messiah, you're the Christ. You've come here. And in those culture, especially someone that was in Second Temple Judaism, you would never receive if you were superior, you would never receive a ritual from anyone that was inferior, especially anything involving repentance. So you have this sort of classic, what you call prophetic tension, meaning that the prophet is speaking better than they understand.

He doesn't really know what he's saying this moment. So often the prophets would say these things, and they didn't really kind of realize what was the implications of it. Budget. But verse 15, But Jesus answered him, let it be so. Now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. And then he consented. This is it what Jesus didn't do here in this moment.

It's kind of neat to see, is he doesn't scold John. He's like, you know, old John. He's like, no, he reorients John. He steers him. And what he's saying is for now, at this appointed time, trust me, let up. We must let this happen. There's something in play, John, that you don't fully understand. It is fitting. Why is it fitting?

What is? Jesus said to fulfill all righteousness. What does that mean? Isn't that weird to fulfill? All right. I thought you were a righteous Jesus. See, one of the keys to understanding not just who Jesus was, but to understanding what it means to be saved by him is to understand his relationship with the law and the prophets, and all the rituals and all the sacrifices and all this laundry list, this sort of ornate erector set of Jewish ritual that was part of that Second Temple era.

And what you often hear Jesus say, or this you and you've heard this in the Scripture where Jesus says, I didn't come to abolish the law and the prophets. I came to what fulfill them and what Jesus means in that and what Jesus's point is that is this God came and he claims his people, and he gives them this law.

And he's saying, this is my perfect law, and I want you to keep it. This is the way you stay in my good graces, to keep my perfect law. I'm going to give you these rituals, and I want you to honor these rituals perfectly. I'm going to give you a throne. This king of this throne, that will be the throne, the King of David that will rule over Israel forever.

And I need the kings to live perfectly. I need prophets to Israel. I need you to behave perfectly. And he gave them all these commands, and Israel and everyone in that stepped into the rose, just like you and me. They failed at this miserably every turn. You cannot read a page of Scripture where Israel is not being taken into the woodshed because they worshiped other gods, they were adulterers.

They were, you know, murderers pick a sin. They were really good at it. And that's why, and we say it as a Christian, as a modern Christian. I said, yeah, well, that's why Jesus was sacrificed for my sins, because I can't live up for those lost. That's right. But there's more to it than that. In order for Jesus to have been an adequate sacrifice in order for us, for him to be a sacrifice that was good enough, he had to be perfect.

He had to be perfect in every way, shape or form. So what? Jesus, what we see in his life is an essay of Jesus satisfying and living the law out perfectly. He is fulfilling it. He is the greater Israel. He is honoring the law perfectly. He is doing the rituals perfectly. He's doing he is. That's the only way that he could be the perfect sacrifice, a lamb without blemish.

So fast forward to our passage here. What do we see? What's going on here? We see God giving a command and he's giving it through. The last of the Old Testament prophets is John the Baptist. And John the Baptist is having a thus saith the Lord moment, which means when he says that kind of stuff, it means that it's coming from the mouth of God.

And what does he say? Repent. He's drawing a line and say, you must repent. And we know as Christians that repentance is the doorway. If we can repent, then we become saved. If we can repent, then we unlock all these treasures of heaven. Well guess what? I can't repent enough. My heart is so conflicted. Have you ever felt sorry for something to be like?

I feel bad about this, but I know I don't feel bad enough, like I just can't get the coin to run deep enough to fall deep enough. I know, I know, I'm sorry, but I'm not sorry enough and I know it. It's like Martin Luther used to say. My tears of repentance are so filled with sin that they, even my tears of repentance, must be washed by the blood of Christ.

And what we see in Matthew chapter three here is that when Jesus steps into the water, he who had no sin and had no need to repent is repenting perfectly on our behalf. He was doing the thing I can't do. And when he steps into the water, verse 16, and when Jesus was baptized, immediately he came up from the water, and behold, the heavens were open to him.

And he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him. And behold, a voice from heaven said, this is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased to. Jesus is baptized in the heavens. The barrier between heaven and earth is just ripped in half. And then all of Scripture, when we hear this concept, this word, you hear the word Trinity, right?

This is something, oh, the Trinity, the Trinity. That word didn't exist back then. What, until like the second century, that people begin to use that word. This is a picture of it. It's there's no place in Scripture where you see the Trinity represented, where the son emerges and the Holy Spirit comes like a dove, and you hear the voice of the father saying, this is my son, with whom I am well pleased.

This is not a sentimental affection. This is not just me. Like, oh, he's tussling his son's hair. It's royal language. I am the father. I'm a God, the creator of the world. This is my chosen heir. The pleasure of the father rests on him because of who he is. The identity, the Holy One of God, the perfect one, the righteous one.

And I want you to be real careful here as we see this in this moment. The father is not bestowing a new honor upon Jesus. He's just revealing it. He's peeling back the curtain and showing what we cannot see on our own. So what does this have to do with my identity? Who is that? What do with your identity?

A couple things one, I want to understand what identity means. Identity. Who we are is less about what you do, and it is everything about who you belong to and what you belong to. My identity is as my father's son. When I was a little boy and I told you that story, it wasn't a product of me running around and running around in the places that belong to him.

That didn't give me my identity. My identity is my father's son didn't wasn't a product of me just feeling comfortable in his space. That didn't make me his son. What made me his son was that I belong to him, I belong to him, and I bore his name. I was his son and that drove me. So why does that matter?

See, when we come to Jesus as Christians, when you read Romans six, it says, do you not know this is the Apostle Paul is like, if you can picture it, he's like grabbing their faces in his hand. He said, do you not know that all of us have been baptized into Christ Jesus? And if you were, you were baptized into his death.

So we're that submersion and you're going into his death. And we were buried. Therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too might walk in the newness of life. She will you come to Christ by faith through baptism. It's in the same way we are submerged into the mikvah, but other than us coming out ceremonially clean, we are submerged into Christ's death.

And at that moment, all of our sins past, present, and future, the things that we have done are doing the things we haven't even done yet. All of those things are removed from me. I become sanitized, and when I emerge from that place, I am raised in new, not new life because God's Holy Spirit is, is laid upon me and I become one with Jesus.

First Corinthians six two says, but he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Do you remember when I was talking about all those things that Jesus did perfectly, the way he perfectly repented? He lived the law perfectly. He loved perfectly the way that he cared perfectly all of those things that he did, all of those things.

That scorecard becomes yours. His bank account becomes your bank account. His righteousness becomes your righteousness. It's poured into you. You get credit for his perfect repentance, even when your the coin of repentance won't drop deep enough in your heart.

It gives us. It brings us to a place of humility, where I come to him with open hands and I'm saying, Lord, I'm willing, I'm sorry, I'm Lord. I'm not even willing. I'm willing to be willing. And when I come out of those waters, because I am one with Jesus.

Because I am one with Jesus. When I come out of those waters, I am a new creation. And the words of the father that were spoken over Jesus in Matthew three, guess what? He now speaks them over you. He speaks them over me. This is my son. You are my daughter with who I am well pleased.

I love you, you are an heir. This is royal language. It's not some hair tussling sentiment. You are an heir. You are. You are a child of God, a coworker with Christ. Which means that Jesus is your brother. You were thinking about that. Jesus is now your brother. And if we all have the same brother, guess what? You know, we say we're so common for us to say, oh, brothers and sisters in Christ, why do we say that?

It's not just because when we go to church together, it's because we are brought together as co-heirs. We are brought together with Jesus. We are speaking a profound theological truth to one

another that you and I are bound together co-heirs with Christ, and we are now inextricably bound. We are brothers and sisters, like it or not. Time to get along.

The chosen race. You see why this matters. Tell you why this matters.

We spend so much of our life trying to become something we're not.

To build this identity that we're not. And when we do that, like I said in the beginning, when you do that, when you try this, it's just a fragile thing. It's this paper maché false face that will not withstand the winds of this world, of this life. It just won't. And I'm telling you that it won't because I've done it.

I've done in my whole life. I'll do it again. It just doesn't. Doesn't work.

If I can do that thing or if I can have that identity, I think I'll be secure. Because if I think if I can be secure, if I can become that thing, once I'm that thing, then I'll finally someone will love me. And it's unstable. To the gospel of Jesus, gospel, Jesus Christ. It doesn't say that one day you'll be in love.

It starts with the fact that you are loved. God so loved the world that he gave his only son. Do you know the cross didn't make you lovable? God loved you before the cross. It was. It was his love that drove Jesus to the cross. That's what brought him there. And you're baptized in his death. And on this in his there is resurrection.

And on our journey now, our journey now is to stand in the reality of our identity, that when we screw up, it doesn't undo who I am. In the same way, when I climbed in that pulpit and I grabbed that mic and I was like, la la la la la yelling at the people in the church, guess what did that make me?

Not his son? No, of course not. I just wasn't acting in a way that I probably should have. And the way that we do, we when we fail and we don't parent well.

We don't do all those things. It does not strip of us, our of our identity. And we now live a life of freedom because we have this sturdy identity in Jesus. Because I don't do the things I don't, I don't pursue Jesus well, I don't walk in this world and do the things in order to be loved. I am loved now, and I'm set free to do the things and to live ruthlessly free, and to transcribe the love and character of God into this world.

It's all. Amen. Thank you. God's people are there. Amen. It's true.

My father died this week.

And, it was on Wednesday. He'd had a long race. Long run. He'd been sick for a while. He's 92. He was. He's tore up. It was time. He hung on for 4 or 5 days, and we sat at bedside where we were with him and his eyes as I sat with him on that last night, and my father was taking his last breath, and my mother said, I sat on his bedside as he exhale, and I watched as I watched life leave his body.

The one who gives me my identity, the one who made me Billy, sir. And he went away.

If I didn't know Jesus in that moment.

I would have been an existential crisis, the likes of which I could not face.

Who am I now? What anchors me? But you know what I know. As sad as it is, as much of an existential crisis is, it still is in some ways, as you have to. Okay, what does this look like now? I know that my identity is anchored in something so much deeper, something that that the relationship of my father here was a finger pointing at something deeper in heaven.

And that was relationship that said, I am anchored in Christ and I can rest because I know my identity in Christ is stable, it's internal, it's enduring, and even death, the death of a father cannot take that away. Amen. It can't take it away. And just as my father fell into the arms of his father, into the arms of his brother Jesus, so too can we now.

And one day we'll do that. And completely and finally.

Who we are. It's not about what you do. And I'm not saying what you do. Doesn't matter. I'm saying your sense of identity is more about who you belong to. Who do you belong to? Who are you as a Jesus? Do you want it to be Jesus? What a great time like today to say yes to that. Amen.

Amen.