

Delighting God's Soul
Rev. Julie Wells Blythe
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First Scripture Reading Isaiah 42:1-9

Second Scripture Reading Matthew 3:13-17

There is always such joy in our congregation, as in all that I have been a part of, when someone is brought into our family through the sacrament of baptism. Promises are made by parents if the one being baptized is a child. The promises are made the person themselves if they are old enough to do so. The congregation makes promises as well, to love, support and uphold the person with our love and prayers, our time and our talents as they grow in faith and hope within their Christian walk. You can feel the excitement in the air when you are sitting in the pew and are reminded every time of your own baptismal promises. It is a great joy to be able to participate in this sacrament as a pastor, not the least of which is being able to actually do the baptism, to pour the water into the fount and to baptize a brother or sister in the name of God, of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit. But it is also a tremendous gift, to be able to look out at the loving faces of the congregation, to walk a new baby up and down the aisle and introduce them and see the looks of love and delight in your faces as you meet the newest member of our family.

John's experience of baptizing people was very different. His baptism was preparing the way for Jesus, for the son of God, whose sandals John said he was unworthy to untie. Imagine John's shock and surprise when Jesus presented himself to John for baptism. We hear John argue with Jesus, saying that he needs to be baptized by Jesus, not the other way around. But Jesus convinces him and so John is given the remarkable task of bringing Jesus, not into a family of faith, but into the beginning of his ministry, a ministry that will take him up onto mountains and down to the sea; a ministry during which he will be lauded as the son of God and tried as a criminal and a ministry which will, eventually, bring those of us gathered, here, today, into a relationship with God that we could never have had without Jesus' willingness to allow God to work in and through his life in a way that had not been done before or since.

In our own baptisms, we are called to that kind of service, the kind that allows God to work within us to bring others to know God, to soothe pain, to walk with people through the thick and thin of life.

I want to share a story with you that Roger Nishioka tells in his article on Matthew 3 in Feasting on the Word. Roger begins:

Kyle was nowhere to be found and I missed him. In the weeks following his baptism and confirmation... he was noticeably missing. Several other members of the confirmation class asked about him too, as did his confirmation mentor. Kyle and his family had come to the congregation when Kyle was in 5th grade. They had attended sporadically so I was more than a little surprised when I asked him and his parents [when he was in 9th grade] if he was interested in joining the confirmation class and they responded positively. Kyle and his parents came for the orientation meeting and agreed to the covenant for [the classes and activities that would be part of the confirmation process.] Kyle was serious in attending and missed a class or event rarely. He quickly became a significant part of the group and developed some wonderful friendships with other ninth-graders who had barely known him. Since Kyle had not yet been baptized, he was not only confirmed but baptized on

Pentecost Sunday. It was a marvelous celebration for all the confirmands, their families and their mentors.

That is pretty much where it ended...When I checked in with Kyle and his folks, they all seemed surprised that I was calling and checking up on them. I distinctly remember his mother saying, 'Oh, well, I guess I thought Kyle was all done. I mean, he was baptized and confirmed and everything. Isn't he done?'

I think I personally identify with this story because I was also baptized at my confirmation, and came from an unchurched family. But for me, baptism and confirmation were not the end of my faith journey, but truly the beginning of the amazing walk with God that has brought me to this time in ministry.

Jesus' baptism was the beginning as well. It was the launching pad for all he would say and do for the next three years of his human experience. At his baptism God said that Jesus was the beloved and that God was well pleased with him. Imagine how God must have delighted in the way that Jesus went about his ministry, showing care and compassion to those who most needed it while being firm with those who did not understand how to properly use power. Jesus told John that he had to be baptized in order to "fulfill all righteousness." In our passage from Isaiah, we heard what God's chosen one's life would look like. God's servant, in whom God's soul delights, will be one who will bring about justice but will do it without breaking those who are already hurt and will not put out a light which is already dim. God's servant is one who will do God's work in the world by faithfully bringing about justice and will not become faint or be crushed until justice and peace are established on the earth.

Obviously Jesus was the embodiment of these qualities which causes God's soul to delight. But I think we also cause God's soul to delight as well.

Listen now to the rest of Roger Nishioka's story about Kyle:

When I talked more with Kyle and his parents, I tried to better explain...and to help them understand why I was calling and how much we missed not only Kyle but the whole family's presence in our community. They were all remarkably understanding and his folks were apologetic. 'I guess we just missed this somehow,' they said. 'And I don't think we did a very good job conveying this to you and to Kyle,' I replied. I also explained that Kyle's relationship with his confirmation mentor is not over and that his mentor hopes to continue to be in contact with him in the months and years to come. Both Kyle's parents were impressed with this and expressed their appreciation. 'Kyle's baptism and confirmation was not simply about his profession of faith,' I further explained. "It is about continuing to grow in his understanding of what God is calling him to do as he lives out his identity as a child of God.'

The next Sunday Kyle and his family came to church and were warmly greeted. They even seemed to be a little relieved at the realization that the journey was not over but was only beginning.'

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In the past few months we have baptized 8 brothers and sisters in Christ into this faith community. Our Confirmation class is up and running with 15 students. Last week at 10:00 and

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1, "Matthew 3:13-17, Pastoral Perspective, Roger Nishioka, p. 240.

this week at 8:30 we have ordained and installed new deacons and elders. We have had 9 join our church in the last few months and are starting another new member class today. We have fellowship groups and choirs and classes and committees who are full of people who are going about living out their faith day by day and doing God's work in our world in beautiful and amazing ways. We are, each one of us, God's beloved sons and daughters. In a few minutes, we will gather around our family table, to eat and drink and remember who we are and whose we are. Let us gather in joy and celebration of the great gift it is to be children of God. And in our lives and work, our worship, our service and celebration, may we bring great delight to God's soul. Amen.