

There is an old Hindu parable about a tiger cub that was raised by goats. The cub learned to bleat and nibble grass and behave just like a goat. One night, a tiger attacked the goats, and they all scattered toward safety. But the tiger cub kept grazing and crying like a goat, without getting frightened. The old tiger roared at the tiger cub, “What are you doing here, living with these cowardly goats?” He grabbed the cub by the scruff of his neck, dragged him to a pond, and said: “Look how our faces, reflected in the water, are the same! Now you know who you are and whose you are.” The tiger took the cub home, taught him how to catch animals, eat their meat, roar, and act like a tiger. Thus, the tiger cub discovered his true self, his true identity.

If you could use just ten words to describe your ‘true self’ what would those words be? What words best describe the type of person you are?

I am not referring to our physical appearance. After all, if we were to look at our reflections in the water, we would see that all of us are humans, not tiger cubs or any other species. What words – I’m suggesting we try limiting ourselves to only ten – best define who you are? Your true self?

Would you say that being a female, or a male, or other, best describes who you are? Would you say that being a spouse, a widow, a widower, a divorcee, a mother, a father, a grandmother, a grandfather, a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, an aunt, an uncle is key to explaining your true identity? Would you best define yourself by your occupation, or your former occupation, or being a retiree? How about being a senior citizen, or a pre-senior citizen? What about descriptors like small ‘c’ conservative, or small ‘l’ liberal, or old-fashioned, or modern, would you apply any of those to yourself? Would describing yourself as a sports fan, or a bookworm, a computer nerd or a technophobe, a dog person or a cat person, a leader or a follower, be included on your top-ten list of self-identifiers? Perhaps you would choose words to define yourself like optimist or pessimist; Anglican or agnostic; environmentalist or climate change denier (okay, that is three words). I am just getting started: obviously, there are a wide variety of way to describe who we are, or our true self.

Now ask yourself, would the ‘b’ word – baptised – make it onto your top ten list of words that best define your true self? Does being a baptized Christian loom large in your self-identity? To what extent does your being baptized explain who you are?

The gospel story of Jesus’ baptism is always read on this day, the first Sunday of the season of Epiphany. His baptism was the first recorded public act of Jesus’ adult ministry. By his baptism, Jesus is proclaimed as God’s Beloved Son, and the reality of God’s Kingdom was thereby revealed.

Today, I want you to focus on your own baptism. If you have been baptized, and I suspect that most of you have been, just how important is it to you that you are baptized? How much does being baptized define your true self?

If your baptism could be revoked and your status as a baptized person taken away from you, would it matter? Would you lose any sleep over it? If baptisms had an expiration date after which they had to be renewed, would you bother? Why, or why not? If one day you received a registered letter from Heaven’s Human Resources Department beginning with the line, “we regret to inform you that your baptism is no longer valid” how would you react?

Other than during worship on a Sunday morning when baptism is mentioned every now and again, do you spend much time thinking about what it means that you are baptized? I must admit that I do not. I do not wake up every morning wondering how my being a baptized Christian is going to affect the things I do, and say, and think during the day ahead. Maybe I should, but I don’t. I wonder how my life might be different if I *did* approach each day that way; if I intentionally placed more emphasis on the fact that I am baptized.

That is something I would like you to think about as well: exactly what difference does it make to you that you are baptized?

Baptisms typically are occasions of great celebration, but baptism has a deeply serious side to it as well. This story is my favorite example of how baptism should be understood. It is an account of a baptismal ceremony for a baby that occurred in a tiny church in a dirt-poor village somewhere in Central America.

On the day of the baptism, members of the congregation gathered in their church. They began the service just as we would begin a baptismal service at St. George's, with readings from Holy Scripture that recall God's gracious acts throughout time to God's people. Then, as the little baptismal procession moved along the short aisle from the back of the church to the altar, the congregation started singing a very mournful hymn, like you might expect to hear at a funeral.

The procession consisted of the baby's father, who carried a small child's coffin that he had made from scrap wood he had scrounged from throughout his impoverished neighborhood. Beside him was the baby's mother, who carried a bucket of water from the village well. The priest followed behind them, carrying their sleeping infant who was wrapped in a blanket.

When they reached the chancel the father placed the tiny coffin on the altar, the mother poured the water into the coffin, and the priest covered the baby, who was awakening from its sleep with embalming oil, as though preparing a corpse for burial. By this point the funereal singing of the congregation had softened to a whisper. The priest slowly lowered the infant into the water-filled coffin, fully immersing the child, head and all. As he did so, he exclaimed, "I kill you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." At which point the baby's parents and the congregation shouted "Amen!" Next, quickly lifting the child out the water and into the air for all to see, the priest declared, "And I resurrect you that you might love and serve the Lord!" Whereupon the congregation immediately broke into a joyous Easter hymn.

But the ceremony was not yet over. The priest covered the child with oils symbolizing new birth and he dressed the child in a beautiful homemade white robe. The singing in the church again quieted as the priest made the sign of the cross on the child's forehead and said, "I brand you with the sign of Christ so that you and the world will always know who you are and to whom you belong." While the singing continued, the people of the congregation came forward and encircled the baby, welcoming the newest member of their church family. The newest member of God's family.

There is something deadly serious about baptism, our baptism, that was captured perfectly in that little Central American church. We have no way of knowing when someone – young or old – is baptized how important a role their baptism will play in their life. No way of knowing if being baptized will become one of the ten most important descriptors of their true self. The only thing we know for certain is what *we* have done, or what *we* plan to do with *our* own baptism.

Being baptized obviously does not change our outward physical appearance. Strangers cannot look at us and say, "I see that you have been baptized and marked as Christ's own forever." That's why I find so powerful the symbolism of the priest in the story making a sign of the cross on the infant's forehead while saying "I *brand* you. I brand you with the sign of Christ so that you and the world will always know who you are and to whom you belong."

A brand is permanent. A brand goes deep. A brand physically changes us. If we took our baptism as seriously as we should, it would brand us. It would permanently change us. The love and the faith, and the courage and the hope, that is baptism would reach into the deepest innermost recesses of our body and soul and reshape us for the better because it marks us as Christ's own forever. Were that to happen, 'baptized' would definitely make it onto our top ten list of words that best describe who we are – our true self.

Here is your suggested homework. I will do it as well. This week, take five minutes every day – that’s all, just five minutes – to think about how being baptized sets you apart – brands you – as Christ’s own forever. Then determine what little thing you might do over the next several days as an outward and visible sign to the world, to God, to yourself, that you have indeed been set apart by God, as a baptized person, as one of God’s own forever.

If we do that simple thing, we will, as the old tiger said to the young tiger cub, “know who you are and whose you are.” **Amen.**

The Baptism of the Lord

9 January 2022

Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming