

## **“The Water’s Edge” based on Matthew 3:13-17**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione, January 8, 2023, Shelby Presbyterian Church**

One thing I cannot understand is the obsession with the British Royal Family. In the aisle at Ingles, they are on almost every magazine, in our social media feeds. They are everywhere we turn it seems. Someone is saying something about them and we act as though their actions, and their lives in any way, affected ours.

Three years ago, they were in the news for the decision of a prince who married an American actress to step away from the titles of royalty and the finances of the British government and give life a go on his own, as a commoner, a lowly subject, but never a king. Nowadays, it’s the intrigue of all this renunciation after his father became King.

Now they may not be living the “full royal life,” but honestly, they’re too recognizable to ever be commoners or ordinary. I haven’t even said their names, and you know them, even if they can’t be called “royal highness.” Whether you or I care or anyone cares, the king is still his father, the next in line is his brother, and that whole family is his blood, with all the fame, and also wealth and influence.

Now, on the other hand: Do you know Larry O’Donnell III? He is very rich and influential, but he is not famous. He is the former President and Chief Operating Officer of Waste Management, a trash removal company. He went undercover in his corporation for the premiere episode of Undercover Boss, which you may have seen, since it came on after the Saints vs Colts Super Bowl back in 2010.

Larry pretended to be a doing a local TV show. No one recognized him. I assume the employees knew there was a company president, but they knew nothing about Larry O’Donnell, or at least what he looked like. O’Donnell found himself trying to keep up with entry level workers. He even got fired from being part of a roadside clean-up crew. He couldn’t get the job done.

Yet, in the episode, he found joy in cleaning toilets, and he also saw the pain some of his workers felt. After decades in corporate offices, he experienced their life. His experience gave him a new perspective. And the compassion he showed for the workers, certainly changed their view of him and management.

Now, as churchgoers, we know it is appropriate to say that Jesus is far greater than these examples – far greater than the royals, and far greater than the head of a \$13 billion dollar business. Yet, there are similarities, that help us see how incredible the gospel really is. Like Harry and Meghan, Jesus did not live the way you’d expect royalty to live, but he came in poverty and as one to serve, rather than to be served. And like Larry O’Donnell, Jesus came down to where the people are, but not for a learning experience or his own sake, but for our sake to share what is rightfully his alone – life eternal – with us.

Today’s gospel about Jesus’s baptism is a revelation. It’s an unveiling of who Jesus is in the water in a world that doesn’t recognize Him. He shares in a ritual He doesn’t really need. He

publicly submits to John the Baptist and accepts a calling that is uniquely His. He goes where He wants you to be, at the water's edge, ready for change.

The baptism that John the Baptist offered in the Jordan River was not the baptism we know as our entrance into Christ's church. It was not the sacramental glimpse of our death and new life in God's Kingdom that conveys the grace of Jesus Christ to us. Instead, John's baptism was a symbolic cleansing, to wash away sin and repent, which means to turn around or change your mind, and to do so at the water's edge and go in a new direction.

John knows Jesus has no sin to repent, and John knows Jesus is, in himself, the new direction. Those baptized by John followed John, but John knows he has been pointing to Jesus all along. So, when Jesus walks through the crowds and approaches John for Baptism, John wants to say "no" because he recognizes Jesus for who he is: the sinless lamb of God, as the true Emmanuel, God with us.

John refuses, but notice Jesus's response: "Permit it for right now, for in this manner, it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness" or as the King James translated it, "Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." In our words, "Get over it, John – For justice, let's make things right. I accept my calling to be one of my people at the water's edge with you, yearning for a new direction."

In this moment, the ultimate undercover boss, the ultimate royal in disguise, steps into our life most completely: The One who calls us, accepts a calling on His life. This is the moment when Jesus begins His ministry, to fulfill His calling to live and to teach, to proclaim that the Kingdom is here and now, and that true power lies in the humility to lay everything down, even the status of being God, the Creator of all things. And true power does this to express love, a self-giving love, a sacrificial love. For even after being betrayed to suffer and die, He redeems us and rises again to restore us.

Even in the depths of our struggle, in our yearning to be renewed and complete – In Jesus, we find that God is in the water with us already, sharing our perspective, living as we do, waiting for us to recognize Him for who He really is. Jesus is the eternal Son – revealed to us as our brother and our God, the true temple and meeting place of heaven and earth, both God's faithful servant and our ever-faithful God.

What I want you to see, is that the baptism of Jesus is as much about you, *yes you*, as it is about God. This is because the God who shared in our humanity didn't need baptism to wash away sins. Yet, as Paul put it, "He who knew no sin, became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God."

You see, creation is the outpouring of God's love. God did not need to create anything. The eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are complete, one God in community. Likewise, God did not need to save us. God could have just started over if that's what God wanted to do. The good news is that even in our sin, God is faithful, calling Israel to be a light to all the world to redeem it all. So then, Jesus is the God of Israel living the full life of a child of Israel.

Jesus walked into that water in solidarity with Israel, as that light, and Jesus is in the water with you, whom He calls to be the light, to fulfill all righteousness. He reveals what it is to accept the calling of God, no matter what might be in store with us down the line. Jesus shows us He is not only God, but he reveals what it is to be beloved by God, the One in whom God is pleased.

As we emerge from the Christmas season, do not lose sight of the joy that is Emmanuel, "God is with us." Our faith is not in a distant God, but a present one. Indeed, Jesus is with you in your struggles and your joys, but he is not there as an undercover boss. He isn't with you for a moment only to return to where He is more comfortable. He doesn't just fix a few things in your life and then go back to His corner office, rewarding you and others who earned His respect on the front lines.

Nor, has Jesus come to just claim He is with you, pretending to walk away from his royalty, only to hold on to every comfort He can exploit. No, Jesus is the only royalty that matters because He shared fully in your experiences. Jesus shares in your life right now. He is in the moments for which you rejoice, in the moments when you suffer, and in the moments you need to repent. He is present in your need to turn from sin, to be forgiven, and to be restored, to accept God's will for you, which is your calling to be His church.

And while Jesus's baptism is about you, I want you to now think about your own baptism, so that you realize that your own baptism, was never really about you – it is about God and the church. Your baptism reveals God's call on your life, seals you in God's love, and it marks you by the physical sign of water with the grace of Jesus to be empowered by the Spirit to participate in God's reign and share in God's work to restore all things.

Your baptism reveals God the Father as the voice calling you beloved, and it reveals the Son, in the water with you, beside you, and the Spirit, descending upon you to guide you. Your baptism proclaims God's goodness in you by revealing the faithfulness of the Triune God for you.

Whatever reason you are here today, you are actually at the water's edge. If you've been a member of Shelby Presbyterian Church for more than 50 years, or even if this is your first time you've ever been in a church, you are at the water's edge. Even if you have another church to which you belong, you are at the water's edge here with us.

And what's more, you are not alone. The God who created all things and shared in your humanity, and stood in the water as you do, is at the edge with you ready to be your Savior. You are called by God, whether you are one of elders and deacons being installed today, or you are a visitor, unsure of what God has in store for you. You are known by God.

But here's the thing: being called will get messy at times, but the One who calls you, truly knows you by name, and knows what you are going through. God is with you, and you are God's beloved. Be filled with this love and share it with others. Come to the water and repent, which isn't about just saying your sorry or self-flagellation. It means turn to Jesus, to let him change your mind – because He is in the water with you, there to share in your struggle.

Now is our opportunity to respond, by loving Him with all that we have, and loving our neighbors – friends and enemies alike – as Jesus loves us. It's not easy, especially when others are always so difficult, but remember that you and I are also difficult, especially for God, because we don't always respect God and do what's right.

Yet, even Jesus, who had every right to make it known that repentance was beneath Him, got in the water with us to be baptized and reveal to us who He is – our God and King. Let us then lay aside what we think we are owed. We can lay aside our excuses, the ones we use to say we are not as bad as those “other” people, and instead, we can get in the water with Jesus.

He is waiting for us to emerge and see the heavens opened to be committed to Him, our God and King, ready to share the love we have been given. Amen.