

Nothing to Prove—Matthew 3: 13-17
(January 12, 2020-Baptism of Jesus)

I can't imagine anything more frustrating than having my identity stolen. Frank Norman, from St. John's, Newfoundland had this happen to him after his wallet was taken. It was one nightmare after another for him. He was arrested for stealing from a Wal-Mart even though he'd never been to the town in which the store is located. He booked a flight for a family wedding in the Caribbean but had to cancel at the last moment after the RCMP informed him that his stop-over in Newark, New Jersey could result in him being removed from the plane as his name had recently shown up on a no fly list.¹ Can you imagine the anxiety and feeling of unease having to constantly prove who you are, of having your identity questioned constantly?

Some scholars think that this same dynamic at least partially explains our faith story today. Scholars believe it is likely that the purpose of Jesus' baptism story is to confirm his identity², to establish that he was God's beloved, the one whom of whom John the Baptist had spoken. To put it in Matthew's words Jesus was the long awaited Messiah, promised and prophesied in the Hebrew scriptures.³ All this begs the question, why was there a need for Matthew's community to prove Jesus' identity? Who was demanding it? Let us start with some context. Evidence

suggests that Matthew's gospel was written sometime shortly after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by Roman forces while brutally quelling a Jewish rebellion. The temple had been the centre of Jewish worship and there was much fear among the Jewish leadership that Judaism itself faced possible extinction. In the face of this perceived threat, tolerance for diversity within Judaism disappeared. If Judaism was to survive it could not be fragmented, Judaism had to be unified to survive.⁴ The community for whom Matthew wrote were Jewish followers of Jesus who worshipped at the temple and synagogues. After the destruction of the temple they were perceived as a threat to Judaism's unity and survival.

The baptism story and much of Matthew's gospel is believed to be a response to this tension. One way to view the baptism story is that it is a way for Matthew's community's to say that they to are a part of the Jewish family, that Jesus is part of the Jewish story—the long awaited Messiah promised by God in the scriptures. The baptism

¹ CBC News Newfoundland, St. John's identity theft victim faces new frustrations, January 25, 2010, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/st-john-s-identity-theft-victim-faces-new->

[frustrations-1.971645](#) ²William Loader, First Thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary; Baptism of Jesus, <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtBaptismJesus.htm> ³Matthew 3: 11-12 ⁴

Robert A. Spivey & D. Moody Smith, Anatomy of the New Testament, p. 98.
story from the perspective of Matthew's community is a plea for inclusion within the Jewish family.⁵

We know that their efforts were not accepted. We know that Jewish followers of Jesus were thrown out of the synagogues, that positions hardened, that the communities separated and that eventually Christians accused Jews of being God killers. We know that to this day this accusation is the basis for all kinds of persecution and violence directed at Jewish people. There is an irony in our story that the need felt by Matthew's community to prove whom Jesus was lead to rivalry, competition and violence—the exact opposite of what Jesus' life and ministry had been all about.

That is what happens isn't it, when we feel we have to prove ourselves to others, when don't accept others for who they are and ourselves for who we are—rivalry, an us/them competition where our survival or advancement depends on the destruction or decline of others. In other words, violence is the result. We see it all the time on the international stage where peoples refuse to acknowledge each other's identities—Palestinians and Israeli's, Kurds and Turks, Christians and Muslims in Egypt and Sudan. How about our own history with First Nation's people?

On a personal level, the violence that results from not accepting others or ourselves is much more subtle. In our time where so much of our identity and social acceptance rests on what we do and how much we accumulate, the drive to succeed can become a violent endeavour. Not that success is bad, it is one thing when the drive to succeed is motivated by wanting to use and develop the gifts God has given us but it is quite another when that drive is fed by the anxiety of not measuring up, of not being acceptable, of having to prove yourself. Then the drive to succeed becomes about being better than others and the success of others becomes a threat to us. We begin to see those around us either as obstacles to our success or as objects whose influence, contacts and power we can leverage for our own benefit. Jealousy, suspicion and resentment build⁶ and a wedge is driven between others and ourselves.

The violence that comes from the need to prove oneself is also seen in our families. Have you ever succumbed to the need to prove yourself as a parent? Your child is throwing a tantrum at a family gathering and all eyes are on you. Nobody says anything, but you know what the looks say, "prove yourself as a parent." You feel so inadequate and react to the anxiety

building inside of you and before you know it, you are yelling or threatening your child, concerned only with how they reflect on you, instead of seeing him/her as a person with needs that are not being met. I speak from experience.

⁵John Shelby Spong, *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love*, P.

237. ⁶Henri Nouwen *Seeds of Hope: A Henri Nouwen Reader*, p. 258

Here is why all of this is so spiritually insidious: living our lives responding to the anxiety of not measuring up by trying to prove ourselves to others or not accepting others for who they are and asking them to prove themselves to us, moves the focus away from what God is doing and asking of us, to our own agendas; agendas that are often based on our fears, our sense of inadequacy and vulnerability. Instead of watching, listening, and cooperating with the movement of the Spirit and the claims that love makes upon us toward right relationship, we engage in the violence of reacting to our fears. The result is that we are not fully present to the moment, which is the place where the Spirit dwells.

The antidote for the anxiety of not measuring up and the violence that grows from the from the need to prove oneself and to have others prove themselves, ironically enough comes in embracing the words that the author of Matthew used to prove and confirm Jesus' identity, "This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." The identity that is bestowed on Jesus is available to us all, not after we've retired comfortably, not after we've parented the perfect children, not after we've conquered our demons, but from the very moment of birth. It is simply up to us to embrace it and surrender our lives to it. It is the gift our baptismal parents have given their children today. I want you to note that these words come at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, not the end. This recognition of Jesus as God's beloved child is not the result of anything he has done; rather it becomes the pre-requisite for everything he will do.

The joy of faith is the realization that with God there is no need to prove anything. With God there is no doubt who we are, we are the beloved with whom God is well pleased. It's an identity that can never be stolen. Life can conspire to obscure it for a while but it's always there waiting to be claimed. It's an identity that liberates us to enjoy life unburdened from the weight of having to prove our worth or judging others for their worth. It's an identity that liberates us to take each day and each person as a gift. Others will no longer be obstacles to overcome or objects to use but rather companions on the journey that reveal to us the diversity of God's creation and the presence of the holy in the midst of daily living. We will forsake the violence of rivalry and discover instead the human family.⁷ May we be granted the courage and humility to embrace this God-given identity, that we may live in freedom. Amen.

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⁷ Jean Vanier, <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/become-a-fountain>, video at the 9:40 mark.