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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC January 12, 2020
Solemnity of the Baptism of the Lord – Year A - 2020 Mt 3:13-17

One of the issues to be faced after the death of a loved one, in the case of a cremation, is what to do with the ashes. A funeral director once showed me a huge cabinet in his office, filled from top to bottom with urns and boxes of all shapes and sizes, containing the ashes left behind by the unconcerned survivors of the deceased. Their attitude was probably, that's done, now let's read the will. And this was almost 50 years ago when cremation was still relatively uncommon. But I did hear of one enterprising artisan, a potter who came up with a rather novel way of preserving the ashes of the deceased. He would ask the family to select some aspect of the deceased's life that most clearly expressed or summed up who that person was; what was their passion, what consumed all their energy, to what was their life directed. Then, he would combine the ashes with clay, fire it in an oven, and create some object that would express that person's "identity." It could be a motorcycle; it could be a flower; it could be anything. Some might find this a bit macabre; others might think it a great idea. How would you want to be so immortalized?

Today's feast celebrates the Baptism of Jesus when His identity is acknowledged as God's "Beloved Son." This essentially is who Jesus is, despite however else He might be regarded either by those who followed or by those who rejected Him. Before all else, Jesus is the "Beloved Son." This is the "identity" bestowed on Him by the Father. Even more remarkable is that because we share in that same baptism, we are also given our identity as "Beloved Son" or "Beloved Daughter." More basic than the removal of original sin, or being welcomed into the church, or however else we might think of baptism, it is the unbreakable bond of love created between God and each of us, as "beloved" sons and daughters.

As a way of expressing this newly bestowed "identity," there comes a point in the baptismal ceremony when the godmother places a white bib on the baby's chest, in the same way that a uniform signifies the identity of the person wearing it. This, then, is the identity we possess as the "beloved child" of God, more fundamental than all those other identities, assumed or imposed, that we will take on as we go through life. When life is ended, and the casket is brought to the entrance of the church, the priest greets the deceased and says, "In baptism, you were clothed in Christ, may you know be clothed in Christ's glory." It is this clothing in the baptismal garment that represents the identity bestowed upon us, an identity that survives even death, when we are united to the One whom we are invited to call "Father."

This "identity" given us in baptism is the one that is most freeing because we don't have to earn it, or show we deserve it, or fear we are going to lose it. All the "identities" we construct for ourselves are by their very nature fragile. It is through the roles we assume in life that we hope to receive love or respect; it is through them that we try to demonstrate that we count for something; they become the markers of our sense of self-worth; what we achieve through them provides us with a sense of purpose and pride. The danger, however, is that if we over-invest ourselves in any one of these roles, however good they may be, if a role becomes our "identity," if it becomes who or what we think we really are, then when that role, that "identity" is taken away by bad luck, competition, illness or simply aging, we may find ourselves left with nothing. Another danger is that we may spend so much time and energy in constructing an "identity," for example, a career, that other aspects of who we are, aspects related to family or friends may be neglected and suffer. We may become human "do-ings," rather than human "be-ings." Or worse, the "identity" I construct may be fake, so that I live in fear of being unmasked as the fraud that I am. It is our God-given identity that allows us to see we have an inestimable worth and value in God's sight before we do anything at all. So, we can take on all those other "identities," use and appreciate them for the value they have, rather than as compensations for the voids in our lives.

Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, but we celebrate our own as well. Before we celebrate it, we have to believe in it, believe in what it means to be the "Beloved Child" of God, and that is difficult indeed. For society tries to convince us that our worth, our value comes from how we look, from what we have achieved, from the gifts or talents we possess, mostly because a consumerist society wants to sell us what it says we need to measure up to its standards. Faith is a gift because it recognizes that our essential worth comes from God, and not from what we make for ourselves or make of ourselves. If we can believe that, we are freed, we are delivered from having to exhaust ourselves in the pursuit of one illusory goal after another.

So, we enter into this liturgy with gratitude and thanksgiving for the gift we have received, equipped to engage life with all its pain and possibility, grounded in the God who loves each one of us as a "beloved" son or daughter. With that as our constant reference point, may we use wisely and well all the opportunities and challenges set before us.