

**Taking Our Place**  
**A Sermon on Matthew 3:13-17 by Rich Holmes**  
**Delivered on January 12, 2020**

One day, years ago, a friend of mine who is also a pastor, met in his study with a couple who planned to be married. The couple wanted my friend to officiate the wedding. Well, as the three of them got to talking, the bride confessed that she was especially nervous about standing at the altar during the wedding. Now, as I'm sure you know, there's nothing unusual about that. Nothing about being nervous is unusual, even though I don't know why this particular bride was nervous. Maybe it was the whole idea of having everyone in a crowd look at her, maybe it was the overwhelming seriousness of standing before God and making promises, maybe it was the fear that something will go wrong on a day that's supposed to be perfect. But because she was so nervous about her big day, this bride, let's call her Jan, had an unusual request. "Can my sister stand up at the altar for me?"

Well, to this request, of course, my pastor friend was confused. "What do you mean? Do you mean you want your sister to marry your fiancée?"

No. She didn't mean that.

"Do you mean you want your sister to stand up and say that she is Jan?"

No, that's not what she meant either. What she meant was that she wanted her sister to stand up and say something like "I am standing here on Jan's behalf."

Now, after pausing for a moment to collect himself and make sure this wasn't a joke, my friend said. "No. No, you cannot do that. I understand you're nervous, Jan. That's natural. But you would not want your sister going on the honeymoon on your behalf, you wouldn't want her sharing her life with your husband on your behalf, so why would you want your sister to stand

there at the altar and say your vows on your behalf.” Now, I know that all of you would be shocked, absolutely shocked to learn that that marriage did not last.

You cannot stand in for someone when you get married and in the same way, you cannot stand in for someone when you get baptized. I have performed many baptisms as a pastor, but I never had someone come to me and say “I would like to be baptized on behalf of my friend or family member”, or “I would like to baptize my child on behalf of someone else’s child.” I also don’t know of anyone who has had such a request made of them. But that’s not to say that no one has ever had such a request. In fact, in First Corinthians, Paul talks about people in the early church being baptized on behalf of those who are dead. But we would regard that as unusual, and even objectionable. If you are serious about committing your life to God, then we would say “You need to come up here in front of the church and be baptized yourself, you can’t have someone else do it for you, and you better do it while you’re still alive.”

There are, of course, some things you can do for someone else. You can pay a bill for somebody else. You can pay a fine for somebody else. You can even feel emotions for someone else like sorrow or embarrassment. But you cannot or at least should not be baptized for somebody else any more than you should be married for somebody else.

The idea that you cannot be baptized for someone else, the idea that only you can be baptized for you seems to be essential to the idea of baptism, so essential, in fact, that it causes confusion in Jesus’ own baptism. For what we learn as John is standing out in the Jordan River is that Jesus comes up to him to be baptized, and this makes no sense to John. And so, John says “I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?” John is baptizing people who are coming to him out in the Jordan because they have been living sinful and impure lives, and they

are coming before John to tell God how sorry they are and to be washed of their sins. John probably wasn't an especially sinful person, but he surely thought of himself as more sinful than Jesus. So he thought he should be baptized by Jesus, not the other way around. For what did Jesus have to be sorry for? What sin does he have to be washed away?

Since Jesus was baptized by John, that can only mean one of two things. It must either mean that Jesus really wasn't perfect and he really did have something to be sorry for, or it must mean that he was baptized in our place. Well, I don't believe that Jesus had anything to be sorry for, so does that mean that Jesus did what I just said you shouldn't do, which was to be baptized in our place? Well, unfortunately I don't have a simple answer to that question. First and most technically, no, Jesus was not baptized in our place in the sense that we no longer need to be baptized, because the baptism that Jesus received from John is not the same as our baptism. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, and our baptism is a baptism in which we symbolically take part in Christ's death and resurrection. So, in the first place and no, Jesus was not baptized in our place because Jesus' baptism is different from ours. But let's forget all about what we do on a Sunday morning in this sanctuary in the comfort of a controlled temperature and nice carpeted floors, but what about John's baptism out in the river Jordan teeming with gnats and mud and frogs. Was Jesus baptized in our place then? Well, again no.

No, Jesus was not baptized in our place if by "in our place" you mean that what he did for us was something impersonal. Usually when you do something in someone else's place, it doesn't matter who does it. When you pay a bill for somebody else, the electric company does not care who actually pays the bill so long as they get the money. To the electric company all you are is a number, and they don't care whether you are Al Capone or Mother Teresa,

whether you're twenty-five or ninety-five, they just want to know that the account is paid.

Now, I'm not suggesting the people who work there are uncaring people, they may care, but their job is not to care. And it's the same when you pay a fine. If you pay a fine for somebody else, it doesn't matter to those collecting the fine who is paying it as long as it's paid. Again, they may be caring people, but it is not their job to care. You know, when I was a kid I can remember my mother one time found me putting money in my mouth and she snapped at me and said "Take that money out of your mouth, you don't know, what.....you don't know where it's been." Your mother too, right? And she was right, you don't know where it's been. And you know what, as long as somebody pays you money for some good or service, you don't care where it's been. It isn't worth any less if it was owned by Al Capone or Mother Teresa. Money is impersonal. Christ came to earth to know us personally, and so he was not baptized in our place if we understand "in our place" to mean something impersonal.

What do I mean by knowing us personally? Sometimes people say "I accepted Christ as my *personal* Lord and Savior." What do they mean by "personal"? What do I mean by "personal"? Do I mean that Jesus wants to know us personally, so that he can know that your favorite color is fuchsia, or that your favorite flavor of ice cream is mint chocolate chip, or you prefer snow-capped mountains to sandy beaches. Is that what I mean by personal? Well, Christ may know us in that sense of personal, I won't say that he doesn't. But that's not what I mean by "personal". What I mean by "personal" is that he knows what it is like to be you. And isn't that a more important kind of personal? I could know all about your favorite color and your favorite ice cream flavor and all kinds of facts about you that I could put on an index card, but if I don't have any idea what it's like to be you, do I really know you?

And so finally, I say yes, Jesus was baptized in our place, if by “baptized in our place” you mean that he wanted to experience what our shame is like, what our humiliation is like, what our suffering is like in having something to repent for. He may not have had anything to feel humiliated about or ashamed about, but so what? As he stood there in line to get baptized by John in the Jordan, who do you think Jesus was lining up with? Those who were coming to repent of their sins, do you think these people were likely the best members of society? Of course not. Jesus was standing in line with petty criminals, adulterers, prostitutes. As he lined up in the Jordan River with the public looking on, he wanted to know what it is like to be us, even the worst of us. But I have to be cautious in even saying that he understands the worst of us. There are some people that I think we shouldn’t understand. Sometimes you hear about terrible crimes on the news. Crimes in which children or innocent adults are harmed or tortured, and you shake your head and say “I can’t understand that. I can’t understand how anyone would do such a thing.” That, I think, is as it should be. We think that people who would commit these kinds of acts are the worst members of society and so we say we cannot understand them. If one of us were to say they could understand such people we would be looked at much differently. I don’t think Jesus understands what it is like to be the worst of us in that way. But he lined up on the banks of the Jordan to know what it’s like to be judged in the way that the worst of us are judged. He lined up on the banks of the Jordan to know what it’s like to be looked at the way the worst of us are looked at, to be despised the way the worst of us are despised.

How many times, when you’ve been angry, have you said to somebody, “Do you have any idea what it’s like? Do you have any idea what it’s like to be embarrassed like this? Do you have

any idea what it's like to be hurt like this? Do you have any idea what it is like to be humiliated like this?" Well, when it comes to our Lord, the answer to the question "Do you know what it's like?" was answered two thousand years ago in all the events of his life and his death, just as it was answered in the story of his baptism—his baptism in our place.