

## “Uncovered Identity”

Mark 1:4-11  
Acts 19:1-7

Jan. 11, 2009  
Rev. Paul Burns

I love starting a new year. It's a fresh start. It's a chance to do things I did not do in the previous year. I can let go of 2008s failures and look forward to 2009s success. It's a clean slate and I'm pumped!

One of the things that helps me to start fresh is cleaning my home and work offices. My wife will attest that I am not the neatest person around, but I do clean house at least once a year. Cleaning the office is always an interesting chore. A few different things always happen. 1) I get to throw a lot of stuff that I either didn't need to hold on to or have no use for anymore. Once you get started with this it can be very satisfying. 2) I discover a few things that I forgot to take care of. Time to renew my auto registration! 3) I find some lost treasure. My favorite pen or a nice note from my wife or maybe even an un-deposited Christmas check from mom and dad. 4) But the best thing is the wonderful feeling of a clean desk. It is truly liberating to know that you can now focus on the present and the future, rather than yesterdays bills and the endless junk of previous years.

But somehow it seems that somewhere around April, all is lost again, for though I cleaned, my way of doing things never really changed. Doomed to repeat the cycle.

I think that this is the same feeling many of us have when we think about our baptism. We have been cleansed and liberated from our past sins, but we often feel stuck in the same messy cycle of sin. So what's the problem? Do we need another baptism?

In our passage from Acts Paul ran across some disciples and he asks them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” Then he said, “Into what were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John's baptism.” Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” Then it says upon hearing this- HEARING THIS- they were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Luke does not write that Paul re-baptized them. Hearing the words led to a true baptism. It was like their eyes were opened.

Paul then lays hands upon them and the Holy Spirit came upon them. This is what is called a baptism of the Holy Spirit. This doesn't necessarily happen when we are baptized with water. It happens when we believe. But what is this baptism of the Holy Spirit?

Let's look at the story of Jesus' baptism we read in Mark. It may seem very odd that Jesus should be baptized at all because he is without sin. What kind of cleansing would he need? His desk is always clean and his bills are always filed.

When he came up out of the water he saw the heavens torn apart...Perhaps this just meant that the clouds parted, but torn is such a strong word. It's the same word used when Jesus was crucified and the temple curtain was torn in two, from bottom to top. This curtain was what separated the space in the Temple called the Holy of Holies from the people. Only the high priest was allowed to go in. This tearing of the curtain was a sign that no longer would God be separate from his people. Perhaps this is something of the meaning of the tearing open of heaven. Through Christ the God who lives in Heaven will no longer be separated from people.

And at the same time that this amazing thing happened, the Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. God's own Spirit came down from Heaven and landed on Jesus or perhaps covered Jesus. The Spirit was working in Jesus in a new and powerful way. It's like a flip was switched on and the power was running. He was fully Spirit led.

And then a voice from Heaven, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." One might ask once, "Didn't Jesus already know this?" When he was 12, Luke accounts that when he stayed behind in the temple and his parents came back to get him he said, "Did you not know that I would be in my Father's house?" Certainly Jesus had some sense of his special relationship with God. But we must not forget that Jesus is fully human as well.

Often things are crystal clear to us when we are younger become more cloudy and more complicated for us as adults. Perhaps Jesus needed to have confirmation of his identity before beginning his ministry. Or perhaps it was John the Baptist who needed this confirmation. Or perhaps it is we who need the confirmation.

Certainly, though, it is absolutely necessary that Jesus knew who he was before performing, as he must. It is the same for us. Unless we know who we truly are, we cannot perform, as we must. Often we are mistaken about our identity. Perhaps we have been labeled even at a young age as a loser or too slow or a sinner. And we cannot seem to escape our identity. We act as we are labeled. This is the problem with my desk perhaps. I'm sloppy.

Jesus is God's son, the beloved, with whom God is well pleased. These words perhaps were what empowered Jesus to be who he has always been- Son of God. This is the identity that is uncovered by baptism of the Holy Spirit. But what about us? What is our identity?

Paul writes in Romans 8, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." Our baptism of the Holy Spirit is the same as Jesus'. When we receive the Spirit by believing, that is when we are baptized by the Holy Spirit, we receive the same voice and the same words that Jesus heard, "You are my son. You are my daughter. You are my child."

This is our identity! We are God's children adopted through our faith in Christ. "The beloved." He calls us. Each of us is God's beloved. This is our identity uncovered in our baptism! Beloved! "With you I am well pleased." God is well pleased with us? Now this is too much. How in the world is this possible? What have we done to deserve these words?

Frankly, nothing. And yet God is pleased with us just for hearing his voice. Just as a parent would be pleased if a long lost son or daughter gave them a call out of the blue. He is pleased, not because we are righteous or holy, but because we are His and we claim it. God is my father. I am his Son. This is pleasing to God.

BUT! He is not satisfied with us the way we are, with our messy souls. This is why he sends his Spirit. First to deliver the initial message: You are my child, beloved. With you I am well pleased. But then to begin to lead us. Just as the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness, the Spirit drives us wherever we need to be. The Spirit empowers us to put to death the things in our life that lead us to death. The Spirit helps us to clean our desk, but also to keep it clean.

This is where the Baptism of Repentance and the Baptism of the Holy Spirit are the same Baptism. Repentance is the cleaning of our souls. We receive forgiveness, which allows us to throw out all that is useless, readdress the debts we must repay and have forgotten about, recover the treasure that God has put into our lives and lastly we are freed to be who we truly are. We look at the clean desk of a soul and see engraved on it "This soul belongs to a child of God, one who is loved, and with whom God is well pleased" And we are then freed to succeed. We are freed of our false identities. The switch is flipped and the power is on and we will now begin to work as we were meant to work. Like a radio that set unplugged is now plugged in and turned on. We begin to work!

That doesn't mean we will never fail again. It doesn't mean that we will perfectly follow the will of God. But it means that we can do the will of God. We can be everything that we are called to be. We look to Jesus as our model and we can do what he did. We can love. We can give of ourselves to others. We can forgive others. We can sacrifice our own wants and needs for the sake of others.

And now I will ask you the same question that Paul asked those other disciples, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" Have you heard that you are a child of God, loved by God? God is well pleased with you? Hear it. Receive the Holy Spirit and be led into new life.