

## 4/5 W's

January 15, 2023

Matthew 3:13-17

Those of you who have come into my office will quickly notice that I have a lot of books. Then again, as a reader and writer, it's something of an addiction. I think of all the books in my office, though, my favorite is a book titled *The Presbyterian Handbook for Pastors*. I say that because, of all the things a "handbook for pastors" could have, it has a couple pages dedicated to how to get out of a traffic ticket. What it boils down to is having a pastoral collar on when you're stopped and/or having your license picture taken with the pastoral collar on. So, I've decided that, the next time I have to get my picture taken for a driver's license, I'm going to wear my pastoral collar. Granted, like most people, I don't want to get stopped by the police, but part of me is also a tad curious if it would work, if my identity as an ordained pastor really holds that much power, and there is a certain level of truth to that thought: that our identities hold power.

Ancient cultures believed that to know a person or thing's name, their *real* name, was to be granted power over them, to be able to bend that person or thing to one's will. Think about the times your parents used your first, middle, and last name or when you've used your child's first, middle, and last name. Whatever they told you to do or you told them to do after using all three names, you or they probably sure as heck did it. Similarly, our names, our social security numbers, our addresses, all these things we use to identify ourselves, are prime targets for identity thieves, particularly around tax season. Our identity is a powerful thing, and this is no less true for Jesus. Knowing Jesus' identity, it opens the doors to a much greater understanding of who we are as his followers, and this is just what today's passage talks about. Additionally, today's passage actually hits on four of the five W interrogative words we all learned in grade school.

Granted, the first W ("who") has a rather simple answer. The voice of God declares "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I'm well-pleased." Plain and simple, Jesus is the Son of God, something of which we are already aware, having heard this story many times before. What about "where," though? Yes, this scene plays out at the Sea of Galilee, but where is Jesus outside of his physical location? In other words, where is he mentally? Notice that, despite his being the Son of God, being wholly divine, and despite John's protesting, Jesus says to him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." So, despite his divinity, Jesus insists that he be baptized, because he identifies also as fully human. Though fully God, he humbles himself to be fully human physically and mentally as well. Thus, *where* Jesus is is in a mental state of complete humility, knowing full well the power he possesses but using it in service of others rather than self-service. This then leads into *what* Jesus is.

So, we know so far Jesus is the Son of God, fully human and fully God, and we know Jesus is humble to the full extent of the word, identifying rather as one seeking baptism than one who is worthy to baptize all. However, despite this power and authority, Jesus is a slave. Not only is he born into an impoverished family and therefore just above slaves in terms of authority in society, he also states elsewhere, "I came to serve rather than to be served." Though God, he is a servant of the people. This is demonstrated in his being baptized. In baptism, we dedicate ourselves to God, marking ourselves as subservient to God in every aspect of our lives. In being

baptized, Jesus so demonstrates that he, too, is subservient to God, though perhaps more than we do. While we are willing to dedicate our lives to serve God and God's people, Jesus is willing to do so even to the point of death on a cross. But why? Why would Jesus be so willing to be subservient even to that extreme point?

This leads then to the last W: why Jesus is, and further why he is being baptized. Consider what rewards humanity's disobedience thus far has earned them in the biblical narrative. God told Adam and Eve not to eat of the forbidden fruit, and they disobeyed. For that, they were cast out of paradise forever. Next, the people were continually wayward and inhospitable towards one another. The first time, God flooded the world for 40 days. When that proved not to be enough, he burned two cities to the ground with fire and sulfur. The people of the Earth, along the way, lost sight of God's power and authority over them, and decided to build a tower to the heavens. For such ego, God scattered the people with many languages, none able to understand another. Centuries later, after being given 613 commandments to follow and doing their best to follow them, they began to fall away from God's statutes, acting in a wayward manner yet again. So, God allowed the Assyrians and Babylonians to overtake them, scattering them far and wide from the land God had given to them until such a time that all persons in those wayward generations were dead. In short, each time God's people disobeyed Them, the people were scattered farther from Paradise. Now comes Jesus, this fully human person who is fully subservient to God, the very antithesis of what has been the norm so far in the biblical narrative. As a sign of this change, of humanity finally turning a corner as it were back towards a reconciled relationship with God, we get this image of the heavens splitting open and the Spirit descending like a dove upon Jesus. Thus, Heaven and Earth are in one place at one time, connected once again for the first time since Eden.

In short, Jesus is a fully-human man, subservient to God despite his power and authority, working towards serving others, all to reconcile the relationship between God and humanity. As self-identified Christians, as followers of Christ, we get this revelatory explanation of who we must be by extension. We must not only serve, but selflessly serve. We must not only be in a relationship with God, but work towards healing the relationship between God and all humanity. Despite our powers and positions of authority, whether that's sitting on a council or getting out of a traffic stop with only a warning because your collar guilt trips the police officer, we must use that power and authority for God's purposes. Though adopted into God's family; signed, sealed, and called "sons" and "daughters;" we must use that gift with utmost humility. Thus, I would invite you all as you go on your way today to ask: How are you, a baptized "son" or "daughter," a "beloved child" of God with whom we can only assume God is "well-pleased," living into that identity?