

## How Deep is His Love? Mathew 3:13-17

The recent news regarding the upcoming divisions of the UM church has raised many questions, and unfortunately none have quick and easy answers. Who are the people called Methodists? What do we believe as a denomination and as a local church? On what basis do we hold those beliefs to be true? Who are the authorities that govern those beliefs? Our feeble human effort to understand God and his divine will can lead to confusion and misunderstanding, and where there is misunderstanding there will usually be division. Historically the deepest of our divisions arise from our interpretation of the Scriptures, the revealed word of God.

That is nothing new, for questions about God's words go way back in time back to our ancestors Adam and Eve. The mother of all questions, the question that gave birth to all other questions about God and His goodness and His grace, is the one that Satan asked of Eve thousands of years ago. Has God indeed said "You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?"

It was a clever question, one designed to plant seeds of doubt in Eve's mind. Satan was implying that God was withholding something good from her and her husband Adam. Eve corrected the evil one, telling him that they were permitted to eat the fruit of the trees of the garden, but the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden God has said "we shall not eat it or touch it, lest we die". Satan's responded with a lie, the lie of all lies: "You will not surely die". It seemed more believable to Eve than God's words. In her mind, Satan was right. How could a loving and kind God allow them to die for doing something that seemed so good? She was gravely mistaken. In the end Eve surely died, along with her husband and nearly every one of their offspring, including each one of our friends and relatives that are no longer with us. The ironic thing is that Satan was also deceived by his own lie. Yes, Adam and Eve surely died, but their death would only be for a season, for a time.

When it comes to Satan, hate is not a strong enough word to describe our feelings and emotions. Satan is evil below all evil, uglier than any sin we can imagine. The problem is that he doesn't come dressed in a devil costume with a red tail and a pitchfork, reeking of smoke and sulphur. He is much too smart for that. As Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians, Satan appears as an angel of light. In our eyes, he will seem to be more beautiful than all the roses on the Rose Bowl Parade floats put together, yet the reality is that he is phonier than the plastic banana in your grandmother's fruit bowl. It is reasonable to conclude that you and I are even more susceptible to his evil lies than Adam and Eve ever were. Unlike Adam and Eve, Moses, Abraham, Ezekiel, Isaiah and the other prophets of the Old Testament we have not heard His voice in person. We weren't fortunate enough to have heard God's voice like Mary and Joseph, John and Peter, Mary Magdalene, the other Mary and Martha, the woman at the well, Nathaniel and Bartholomew and thousands of others did. We weren't around at Jesus baptism to hear those powerful words of God from heaven "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." We plead for mercy because we have not encountered God face to face, we haven't heard Him speak. Or have we?

When it comes to physical death, it wouldn't make a difference. With very few exceptions, even those who heard God speak and believed His words eventually died. Lazarus died twice. Even Jesus died. His love for us is so deep He willingly gave up all that He had, all that which was rightfully His, all His glory and majesty, and came to earth as a human being to suffer and die for people like us, even people who mistakenly believe Satan's lies. **The forces of darkness and evil are not overcome by hearing God speak to us from heaven but by placing our faith in the Living Word of God, the One the Bible calls Jesus.** Only Jesus has overcome evil, the sting of death.

Jesus was baptized not because he needed to have His sins washed away, but to be in unity with His people, people like us, people struggling at times to understand God and His plan for salvation. This best analogy I can offer, and it is weak, is that He is like that person who shaves their head to support a loved one who has lost their hair to chemotherapy. He not only shaved His head in support but went even further and gave His life so we can live.

Jesus was baptized to remind us that we were there with Him in the water that day. Without Him we would all drown in our sins. By the way, did you notice that the things that have caused debates and division in the church about baptism over the centuries – how deep the water was and what words were spoken, are nowhere to be found in the Scriptures? Jesus was baptized to bring us back to our roots of who we are as God's people, who we are as the people called Methodists. Jesus was baptized to remind us we are people seeking righteousness and holiness, people saved by grace.

Have we been arguing over the wrong things? Is it possible that the amount of water used doesn't matter? Is it possible that God doesn't much care whether we sprinkle, dunk or immerse but is much more interested in having us understand why we need to be sprinkled, dunked and immersed? Is it possible that baptism is less about us and more about relationship with the One who has such deep love for us?

Jesus baptism was not for His sake, but for ours. When God spoke those immortal words "this is my beloved Son", it wasn't for Jesus benefit. If it was, He would have said you *are* my beloved Son. Jesus already understood that perfectly, it was the reason He was there in the first place. God spoke those words for our benefit, just as He did every other word recorded in the Scriptures. Those words were spoken, recorded and preserved so that we might know how deeply God loves us, how deeply Jesus loves us, how deeply the Holy Spirit loves us. They were written so that we might know how to live our lives in such a way that God will be pleased with us as he was with His beloved Son Jesus. The Word was, is and always will be true, and He has given us the choice to believe Him, or to believe something different at our own peril.

Let us recognize the lies of the enemy, and trust upon grace for forgiveness when we are deceived. In our prayer time this week let us thank Jesus for His deep love. Thank Him for grace, mercy and the holy desire to avoid sin and seek righteousness. Amen.