

Faith Mennonite Church  
January 13, 2008

The Baptism & Manifestation of Jesus  
Church Membership Sunday  
*Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17*

It is thought that the baptism of Jesus caused a bit of embarrassment in the early church: why, if Jesus was God's son and without sin did he need to be baptized? And why did he come to John who called for a baptism of repentance? Embarrassed or not, all four gospel writers include an account of Jesus' baptism.

Although we are not having any baptisms today since the three people who are joining in membership and associate membership have previously been baptized, I'd like to comment briefly on ways that our gospel text today speaks to us of church membership.

Jesus' request for baptism from John the Baptist emphasizes his humanity and his own sense of humility and obedience to another, even as he is about to form his own community of followers. Joining a church takes humility. There's not a lot of status to be gained in today's world from professing to be Christian. In the Mennonite church our membership pledge includes the notion of accountability, of "giving and receiving counsel," which goes against the tide of individualism in our culture. Jesus may have understood his baptism as his initial step of carrying the sins of others, something we usually associate with his death. In church membership we join Jesus in offering ourselves for the care of this community and those we serve beyond our walls.

We do well to think about John the Baptist as we enter into membership. John wasn't so sure about Jesus' request. Shouldn't he, John, be asking Jesus for baptism? Most of us feel like John, not just at the point of membership, but often on our journey of faith. Am I really ready for this? Aren't there others who could do the job better? Membership means that we'll sometimes be asked to do things we don't feel qualified for, yet in the community of the Spirit, we find God's strength to do things we might not have imagined ourselves ever doing.

Finally, and the thing that really makes this all possible is the voice of God: "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." This is a word to all of us who have acknowledged the God of Abraham and Sara, the God of Moses, Aaron and Miriam, the God of Joseph, Mary and Jesus as our Father/Mother/Savior God. We come to membership not from a sense of obligation, but drawn to a love that is stronger than death.

In the January 8 issue of *The Mennonite*, which arrived in my mail this week, there is an article by a Pennsylvania pastor, Ron Adams, who wrote a reflection on the meaning of church that I believe is fitting for today. ("Warning: church ahead.")

(New member sharing.)

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