**Tattooed by Baptism**Isaiah 42:1-9  
Matthew 3:13-17

The wedding was being held on an outdoor patio area at the same restaurant where my wife, Michele and I had our own wedding reception years before. It is a beautiful location. The Long Island Bay opens up directly in front of you and just to the side is a channel through which boats leave from the marina heading out to open water. The chairs were all lined up in neat rows, with flowers carefully placed on the outside of each row. There was a canopy for the bride, groom, clergy and wedding party. We were in my father-in-law’s boat moving through the channel. The wedding party was beginning to gather under the canopy. It was just as we drew close to the wedding that my brother-in-law decided to yell out from the boat, “Don’t do it.”

This past summer as every summer, we were at the ocean again sharing in this annual family gathering. On a warm sunny day in July cousins decided to line up in a row so they could have a picture taken of their various tattoos. My son and daughter were among them. There is no doubt which of them would take the prize for the largest tattoos. My daughter’s tattoo is of an ocean scene and covers virtually her entire back. My son, who got his a couple years after my daughter, decided to go with a moose head in honor of his love for the Boundary Water’s. The antlers on Aaron’s moose head reaches from one shoulder blade to the other. Nothing against anyone here who might have a tattoo, but had I been present when my son and daughter got their tattoos, you might have heard me yell out, “Don’t do it.”

One thing tattoos and marriage have in common is they are pretty much a lifelong commitment. At the very least, it is probably a good thing to have someone seriously raising the question, “are you ready for this commitment? Are you ready to be with this person the rest of your life? Are you ready to wake up every day with an ocean scene or a moose head on your back?” Tattoos and marriage are about a serious commitment. Yes, people run off to Las Vegas and get married after having known someone for a couple days or get a tattoo after having had too many margaritas. But, anyone contemplating either will be fortunate if they have people in their lives asking are you ready for this commitment?

As we are reminded in our Gospel lesson today, John the Baptist has a tattoo parlor of sorts, set up along the Jordan River. Rather than the visible tattoos that are on the back of my son, daughter and their cousins, John’s tattoo is one that is placed on your heart. The tattoo of John’s baptism commits you to a way of living that is counter-cultural and often puts those baptized in direct conflict with the values and the norms of Rome and religious leaders that Rome has gotten to do their bidding.

You no doubt recall that when some of those folks came out to see John, thinking they would have a dip in the baptism waters with all the other folks, imagining a tattoo, not unlike one of those rub off tattoos you can buy, John said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” John lived with the prophetic calling of Isaiah and all the other Hebrew prophets. He knew injustice, inequity, abuse of power and religious hypocrisy when he saw it. If you were tattooed by John with the waters of baptism, you knew that you were committed to a way of living that imagined an all together different world, a world in which those marked and destined for the pipeline to prison are instead destined for freedom. As the prophet Isaiah proclaims, “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon..” Anyone thinking about getting tattooed by John’s baptism was lucky if someone, somewhere yelled out, “Don’t do it.” This is a serious commitment.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus comes to John’s tattoo parlor so that he might be baptized. John gives Jesus his own version of “don’t do it” when he tries to stop Jesus from getting baptized, saying “I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?” Most Biblical scholars point out that the baptism of Jesus by John creates an awkward moment for the Gospel writers, because it looks like Jesus is a disciple of John. In order to correct this misimpression the Gospel writers, including Matthew, do their best to emphasize and perhaps even put on the lips of John his protestation and insistence that Jesus should be doing the baptism. But, I think it is also quite likely that John knows full well what this tattoo will mean for Jesus and before Jesus steps into these waters, from which there will be no return, he is saying to Jesus, “are you ready for this commitment?” “If you begin proclaiming the love and justice of God’s Realm insisting it has real life implication for people today and not just some hear after world, you could find yourself in serious trouble, maybe even end up on a cross”.

As we know, Jesus goes ahead with the baptism, insisting that it is only by entering fully and completely into this commitment that the righteousness of God, the right and just world God intends, can be fulfilled. All of the Gospel writers testify the fullness of Jesus commitment to God’s love and justice is so complete that when people are with Jesus, they feel they are in the very presence of God. Matthew tells us that as Jesus steps out of the waters, the commitment Jesus makes is resoundingly affirmed when a voice from heaven is heard saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

“Don’t Do It”. Every baptism in every nation should have someone nearby who is willing to yell out, are you ready to make this commitment for yourself, or on behalf of your child? When all the other students at school begin picking on some kid because she is socially awkward, do you really want your son or daughter to run the risk of being ostracized from the group by standing up for this child? When someone makes a racially offensive remark do you really want your child to speak up, even though it may mean losing friends or status? The children’s story we read today about people being the same the world over is only a starting point for those who have been tattooed with the baptism lived out by Jesus. It is necessary and essential for our children and for adults to recognize the common humanity that we all share, regardless of our birth origin, our culture, our religion, our sexual orientation, or any of a number of ways we become divided. Everyone is loved by God. This is the place where the tattoo of baptism begins. We are all beloved. But, it is only a starting point.

As we get older our commitment to the baptism that has been tattooed to our heart inevitably will lead us to ask more difficult questions. “Why are so many children from one group destined for college, for opportunity and privilege and so many children from another group destined for jail, this pipeline to prison, as it is now called?” Why have some nations acquired so much wealth and other nations remain in deep poverty? How did it get to be like that and what keeps it this way?

Perhaps you heard or saw the story in the paper about Oby Ballinger, the UCC clergy who was beat up the day after Christmas by a young African American man. The young man who beat him up spoke at our Overcoming Racism Conference this past November. He has been struggling with mental illness and has been in and out of jail, yet is articulate and bright with much potential. This past week Oby met with a group called the Brotherhood, who works to assist young African American males. Together they explored ways they might yet be supportive of this young man. Oby’s response is in many ways counter-cultural, rather than condemning, he is willing to learn about this young man’s life, about community and how it can be a safer place for everyone. It is the response of someone seeking to live in faithfulness to the tattoo of baptism, which has been placed on his heart. It would be a lot easier to be bitter, judge this young man or simply walk away.

The tattoo of baptism calls us to forgive when we would rather remain angry, acknowledge our own faults when it is easier to act blameless, to face difficult truths when those truths might come with a price tag, to show compassion and love when we would rather attend to our own desires, to speak out when it feels safer to remain silent. None of this is done alone for the tattoo of our baptism is something that brings us into a community which share the same values, the same commitments to God’s love and justice lived out in our everyday lives.

According to Matthew and all the Gospel writers we are supported and sustained by the very same spirit that calls Jesus beloved.

Don’t do it. Anyone who is considering baptism is well served if someone, somewhere poses the question, are you ready for the life-long commitment this tattoo entails?

**Isaiah 42:1-9**

*In our first lesson we hear the prophet Isaiah serving as a channel for the voice of God speaking about one that has come to be known as the suffering servant. Isaiah leaves no doubt that to hear the voice of God, to be called by God, is to be about the work of God’s justice for all the earth. It is God working through God’s servants who will brings about a new reality in our world.*

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth, and the coastlands wait for his teaching. Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

**Matthew 3:13-17**

*Our Gospel lesson tells the story of Jesus being baptized in the waters of the Jordan by John. John is initially hesitant, but Jesus makes clear that baptism is his starting pointing for completely and fully living into the righteousness of God’s justice and love.*

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."