It’s hard to know the proper response to someone being baptized. Should we celebrate with them or commiserate?

My predecessor, Bruce McIver, would barely disturb the water when he baptized someone. The event was like going to a funeral, so solemn was the spirit. And you can understand that if you think about it. We say, “buried with our Lord Jesus in baptism.” It’s a kind of death we’re depicting, the death of the old self, a way of living that we say we’re giving up of our own accord in order to live for Christ.

By contrast, more and more I see churches making baptism a spectacle like a birthday party. People start clapping and cheering for the person, as if they’ve won an award. I baptize with more gusto than Bruce did, but I recoil at a lack of decorum. And yet it is a kind of birthday party, I guess—a sign we’re being born anew. We don’t just say, “Buried with our Lord Jesus in baptism”; we also say, “Raised to walk in the newness of life.” What does that signify if not resurrection, the victory over death and the celebration of new life in Christ?

So who’s right? I mean, beyond matters of taste. Hard to say, since both viewpoints are true. Baptism is a blessing and a calling at the same time.

Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist at the beginning of his ministry. His baptism was about both who he was and what he was supposed to do. It represented his acceptance of his chosenness.

The voice from heaven that spoke over him in his baptism said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Those words come from two passages in the Hebrew Bible that Jesus and those who heard the voice would have understood. “This is my son,” taken from a coronation psalm, was proclaimed over a new king of Israel.

The other part, the part about God being well pleased with him, comes from the prophet Isaiah in the section called the Suffering Servant passages.
Isaiah 42:1 says: *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.* Jesus’ baptism sealed in him that his call was to love the world to death.

John himself said of Jesus the day after his baptism, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” He didn’t say, “Look, here is the Lion of God!” Lambs get slain, don’t you know?! Lions are the slayers.

I’m not sure that Christians understand that much these days. We seem to think it’s only a sign that we have punched our personal ticket for the heaven train when we die. We don’t understand that if we are baptized in Jesus’ name, we are chosen in him and with him to share in his mission to the world. This is why, years ago, we added the salt and light elements to baptism. They remind us that if we are baptized into the family of God, we are now engaged in the family business.

First, though, a word about the blessing of our chosenness. The late Henri Nouwen was a celibate gay priest in the Catholic Church whose inner struggle over his sexuality and religious calling shaped his remarkable writings on the spiritual life. Nouwen had a secular Jewish friend who asked him in the simplest way possible to explain what his Christian faith meant to people like him. The book he wrote, titled *The Life of the Beloved*, explained the faith through the lens of Jesus’ baptism.

*The great spiritual battle,* Nouwen says, *begins—and never ends—with the reclaiming of our chosenness. Long before any human being saw us, we are seen by God’s loving eyes. Long before anyone heard us cry or laugh, we are heard by our God who is all ears for us.*

*How do we get in touch with our chosenness when we are surrounded by rejections? First of all, you have to keep unmasking the world about you for what it is: manipulative, controlling, power-hungry and, in the long run, destructive. ... Secondly, you have to keep looking for people and places where your truth is spoken and where you are reminded of your deepest identity as the chosen one. ... Thirdly, you have to celebrate your chosenness*
constantly. This means saying ‘thank you’ to God for having chosen you, and ‘thank you’ to all who remind you of your chosenness.¹

I love to tell people preparing for baptism to look at the symbols of the Tapestry that hangs behind the baptistery. The circle with the dove that floats above their heads is a reminder of the Spirit that descended upon Jesus in his baptism and a reminder of the words of blessing that God spoke to him in that moment. I tell them to listen for the whisper of God that echoes down through the ages. You are my son [or daughter], my beloved child. In you I am well pleased.

This is a truth spoken from all eternity over you as God’s beloved one. In contrast to the way the world works—privileging some and not privileging others—this is the heart of the good news of the new world that God is bringing and the church is pointing toward.

Janis Ian sang her 1970s melancholy anthem At Seventeen about growing up an ugly teenage girl who was never invited to the dance, spending Friday nights alone, watching the pretty girls plan the rest of their predictable lives of love and social security. She saw the look on the faces of those who were left out. To those of us who knew the pain/Of valentines that never came/And those whose names were never called/When choosing sides for basketball. So many people are born into circumstances not of their own choosing, which makes them wonder why the world is tilted toward some and against others.

Yesterday some of us were at Friendship West Baptist Church in South Dallas for the third annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Teach-In. A black child in America does not start out even with a white child, and it only gets worse from there. Too many young people in our city grow up in poverty in neighborhoods deliberately designed to keep an inequitable social order intact, without access to high-quality education or healthcare, grocery stores or Internet access, and without the social contacts

¹https://us4.campaign-archive.com/?e=646146a867&u=838944ee48d7a9d35dcce6d60&id=173bf10a8
needed to get good jobs. Last year, Dallas was the third-worst city in America in economic equity, as measured by race.

How tragically easy it is to imagine that maybe God intends it to be that way. Baptism into Christ Jesus is a spiritual trump card to all the ways we divide humanity. Every black child, Latino child, poor, neglected, abused or abandoned child, foster child or refugee child or every gay or trans child who is baptized into Christ hears the same blessing of God that God says over any other child: *I see you. You are mine. You too are my beloved child.*

Whoever you are in this room today, whatever you have been through, hear this good news: God sees you. God knows you. You are God’s beloved child.

But this chosenness is a burden, too. Your blessing in Christ is also your commissioning to share in his mission. When Jesus stepped into those waters of baptism, he bound himself to those who suffer injustice in the world. And so do we.

Israel’s chosenness was blessing and burden both. Isaiah speaks for God: *You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.* But then the prophet speaks for the people in reply: *I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.*

For centuries Jews have wrestled with this blessing of chosenness. What has it gotten them but trouble? They have been driven out of one nation after another. They have been despised and murdered. They have had every reason to want to give up their chosen-people status. They just want to live and let live, to be left alone. But God will not leave them alone, and God will not leave any of us alone who have been joined to them through our faith in Jesus. It’s not just about us. It’s about everyone who has been left out and who has wondered why the world is set against them.

God answers the prophet and Israel: *It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.* Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the
nations, the slave of rulers, ‘Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.’

Christian friends, the blessing of God is on us, not when kings and princes bow down to us, but when we show our solidarity with the lost, the least, the little and the last, whom God cares for with an everlasting love. We are blessed to be a blessing. We are chosen to announce the chosenness of all. God is with us with power when we work to free every captive and rejoice over the despised and rejected as sisters and brothers and siblings of one Heavenly Father.

When Martin Luther King was at the lowest point of his life, with death threats daily upon him, he sat at his kitchen table late one night and cried out to God. Here’s how he described it:

I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.

The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. ‘I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.’

At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: ‘Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.’ Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.²

The poet Roger Housden said: Whatever your circumstances, people will start to give you

²Taken from King’s book, Stride Toward Freedom.

advice as soon as you disturb the status quo. That advice is likely to be bad. It is bad because they are seeking not to further understand your calling, but to preserve the world as they know it.

I don’t know what you’re going through today as you wrestle with the circumstances of your life. But I want you to hear that if you will stand up for justice and truth, God will be at your side forever.

King’s life was taken from him, but he had already rehearsed for that moment in his baptism. He had already died and been raised with Christ. And so have we. Amen.

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3 Ten Poems to Change Your Life (Harmony, 2001).