

“Free to Be: A Divinely Created, Covenant People”

Genesis 1:27a, 31a; Exodus 3:13-15; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Jeremiah 31:33

New Revised Standard Version

So a few weeks ago, I’m doing some research for this summer series on Baptist identity. I want to look more deeply into the question: “Why Baptists have ordinances instead of sacraments?” I know “why” but I’m looking for a different way to say what I want to say. So of course, I go to Professor Google. So as I start typing “Why Baptists…” the google search bar immediately autofills with, “Why Baptists don’t dance.” I sort of roll my eyes and start to hit the delete button, but you know how once google starts autofilling it doesn’t just give you one option, they have this whole dropdown menu of options of the most common searches that begin with the words you’ve typed? Want to take any guesses as to what is on this menu? (I’ll give you a hint – my question of ordinances instead of sacraments ISN’T on there!)

Why Baptists don’t dance
Why Baptists don’t play cards
Why Baptists don’t drink

Why Baptists don’t observe Lent
Why Baptists can’t be gay
Why Baptists don’t celebrate Christmas
Why Baptists don’t ordain women
Why Baptists don’t baptize infants
Why Baptists ban yoga

Not a single item on that drop down menu is phrased in an affirmative stance (everything is why we DON’T do something), *many* imply that we are some kind of archaic group of people who have zero idea of how to kick back and have fun, one is homophobic, another misogynistic, one is just uninformed – there is nothing Baptist or not-baptist about yoga (yoga is an eastern tradition; they’re not even connected!), and a couple of them are just downright curious. I mean, I get the whole Lent thing, I know not “all” Baptists observe Lent, but Christmas? *Seriously??* What Baptists can’t get on the side of baby Jesus? (sigh)

Of course, these are all stereotypes about Baptists, but every stereotype has some kind of basis in experience – even if blown out of proportion or misunderstood. Sadly, some of these are not blown out of proportion. There are many Baptist churches who have preached hate and homophobia, and still do. And it's cost countless people their lives. There are some Baptists who feel drinking, playing cards, or dancing are from the devil. There are some Baptists who do not ordain women or call women into preaching or pastoral roles.

Sadly, these google searches are not completely unfounded or ridiculous. They are rooted in real experiences of people with real Baptists. But – and let me be clear on this – *none* of these statements are rooted in Truth with a capital T. God reveals Truth, not Baptists. Furthermore, “Baptists” cannot be all lumped together as one group – we've been nonconformists from the beginning and have a very strong independent streak.

More on all of that later this summer.

The point is. the world is out there telling us what they believe Baptists to be and to do, and most of it is negative (at least according to the top google searches). And a lot of people have been hurt by Baptist churches – so we do have responsibility in that because we share a name, and we have to work extra hard to be agents of healing. It's also true that a whole lot of people have been *blessed* by being Baptist, including myself, and I hope you, too.

Just for the record: many of us in this room are Baptists and some of us drink, some of us dance, some of play cards (or dominos!) – and all of those things have happened in this building. Some of us are gay. Some of us are ordained women. Some of us practice yoga. Some of us were baptized as infants. Many of us observe Lent, and I'm pretty sure all of us celebrate Christmas! And none of those things makes us or breaks us as a Baptist. Our

Baptist identity is far deeper than that.

I know there are skeptics out there, that may wonder: “*Why Baptist? Isn’t that an archaic label in a post-denominational anti-institution culture?*” And some of you, I know, are pinching yourself that you’re even part of a Baptist church – you still can’t believe it. I get that too. And others of you are died in the wool, life-long Baptists who went to Baptist colleges and serve on Baptist boards. You couldn’t be prouder to be Baptist. It’s not just your heritage and your history, but it’s also an identity that gives your life meaning today. And there are probably even some of you saying, “*Calvary’s a Baptist church? I didn’t know that. Nor do I care really. I just like Calvary because it’s Calvary.*” And, that may be true – but you may not even know that some of the very things that make Calvary “Calvary” – are actually less about Calvary and more about being Baptist!

We who claim the name of Baptist have a lot to be proud of, and we have a lot to repent of, and we have a lot to take a stand for too. But we can’t know what to be proud of and what to repent of and what to take a stand for unless we know what it actually means to be Baptist. Lord help us if the world only knows Baptists by what we are against instead of what we are FOR!

So that’s why we’re embarking on this summer adventure together called: *FREE TO BE: An exploration of Baptist identity, freedoms, ordinances, and associations.* Because at its core, being Baptist is about freedom – freedom as individual Christ-followers, and freedom as local communities of Christ-followers.

It seemed like, after 15 months of being apart, as we are regathering and regrouping as a community that now was as good as time as any to both rejoice in God and reimagine and rediscover our identity – who are we, why do we do

what we do, and what does it matter?

And I'm highly aware that we have people from all traditions and backgrounds who worship with us, and we welcome that; it's actually very Baptist, believe it or not!

But even if you are a Presbyterian or a Catholic or an Undecided/Unsure who just enjoys worshipping or serving with us – this series is for you too. Often when we learn about others, it helps us sharpen our own beliefs – helps us know why we believe what we do.

The first two weeks, we're going to look at our Old Testament and New Testament foundations, because let's be honest – Baptist do not exist in a vacuum. We have deep roots first and foremost as God's Children and then as Christ's Church. Then we're going to explore what makes us Baptist in particular – the two ordinances – Baptism & Lord's Supper and the four freedoms: Bible Freedom, Religious Freedom, Soul Freedom,

Church Freedom and. Then we're going to look at how those freedoms have shaped our life here at Calvary, including a vote we took on an inclusion statement back in 2011. Then we're going to move into exploring our larger Baptist denominational (or associational) identity on the national and regional levels and as well as the role of ecumenic and interfaith partnerships in our identity. And then we'll close out the series with a week exploring where you as an individual fall into all of this and then another week on where we as a church – today – in this moment fall into all of this. It's a look at our past, but with a keen sense of where we are in the present and where God is leading us in the future.

As we go through this series, I invite you to think about Calvary Baptist Church like a first name, a middle name, and a last name.

I know that in other parts of the world, names work differently, but in general, here in the United States, last names are

family names. It indicates a larger group of people to which you are connected or related. So, just as my last name Scalfaro connects me to a whole family of Scalfaros that is generations beyond me and before me, and even represents families like the “Burns” family that married into the Scalfaro family, the last name in Calvary Baptist Church is “Church” – which connects us to Christians, at-large. Our big family group that goes back for generations is the Church, or Christ-followers; it’s the most broad and general of our three names, and yet it proclaims something powerful – that we follow Jesus and are connected to all other Christian denominations and Christ-like communities across the world...whether we know them or not or agree with them or not or think like them or not! (Told you it was kind of like family!)

And then we have our first name, Calvary. Think of this like you do your own first name. This is the most intimate and personal of the three names; it is what we are known

by, it’s very particular to us as individuals. Our first name speaks to what makes us who we are. I am Anne, a 40 year old pastor, a daughter, a wife, someone who drinks my coffee black and likes the color orange. These things make me “me.” Likewise, Calvary is our first name. It signifies all that is unique about us – and when you talk about Calvary and what it means to you, often you are talking about ministries like Bootstraps & Blessings; not every church has a ministry like that, not every Baptist church does either – but Calvary does. Just as other churches have ministries that we don’t.

Middle names are trickier aren’t they? Some people don’t have middle names. Some have family names that are middle names. My middle name is my maiden name. Some people’s middle names are extensions of their first name. There’s not a single formula for middle names, but in our culture, a lot of times middle names are overlooked. Just as a lot of us only use our first and last

names in everyday dealings (look at your name tag today!), people join churches usually because of its first and last name. If they are a Christian, they look for a church (versus say a temple or mosque). That's what gets them in the door. But then usually someone stays or joins the church because of the first name – Calvary. Because of what makes us unique, the people who are here are what ministries we have.

And a lot of people stop at that. They may never even think much about our middle name or maybe just gloss over it like when you see someone's middle initial and you wonder, huh, I wonder what that stands for? We often just don't think much middle names. But – just because we may not think a lot about the fact that Baptist is our middle name, doesn't mean it's not important. Middle names are still on our passport and driver's license for a reason! It gives significant clues to our history and identity, and while it may not live in our everyday consciousness – it's an important part of our name.

Like a maiden name or a family name, our middle name – Baptist – connects us to a particular family of Christians, beyond just those of us at Calvary, and it also shapes some of our core practices and beliefs.

It doesn't have to be out front and center all the time, but it should be known. And that's our hope with this series, is to get to know our middle name, Baptist, a bit better, and make sure it's not just something that's used when we're in trouble (like Jonathon David Smith you get back here this minute!)

But you know what? There is something even more foundational than those 3 names. Because before even we were a church, before we were known specifically as Calvary Baptist Church of Denver, before we were a part of our Baptist affiliations and partnerships --- before our first, middle, and last name --- comes our Creator – God. I AM. Before we had a name to begin with, we were creator in the

image of God, in the image of I AM. Our belovedness and belongingness to God precedes any and all of our other names. It unites us to all of humanity. Every single person on this earth is God's beloved creation, created in God's image. And if we truly believe that – it will radically shape our theology and what we believe about being a Christian, let alone a Baptist!

Before we were ever Baptists, we were beloved. Before we were ever Christians, we were created. And before we were ever a community called Calvary, we were a community in covenant with God. These are our scriptural foundations from the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible.

In Genesis we are reminded that each and everyone of us is created in the *imago dei* – the image of God and that that image is good. From the beginning, God sees us as God and puts God's own reflection in each of us. God says,
"Name, I see myself in you /

Name, I see myself in you /
Name, I see myself in you..."
Your beginning identity before anything else – is *imago dei*, the image of God. And it is good. You are good.

Then in Exodus we are reminded that God is God and we are not. Moses is being called to lead God's people and he's doubtful and scared as we'd all be – and God reminds Moses of two things: 1) I am God, I AM who I AM. God needs no descriptors of identity. God is God. That is what differentiates God from us. God is before all and beyond all and within all of us and because of that: God is *with* us. God promises Moses that Moses will not be alone. God goes with him and all of God's people.

We are beloved, divine image bearers. And God is with us. And in being with us, as we read in Deuteronomy, God gives us commandments (the law) to help us live in the best possible relationship we can with God and with others. These rules aren't meant to

regulate or punish as much as to reach out to us and draw us closer through appropriate boundaries and guidelines.

Of course, we know the history of Israel, and how many times they failed to teach their children about God, or how many times they forgot that God was with them – remember them complaining about manna in the wilderness right after being liberated from enslavement in Egypt?

But nonetheless, they cannot escape God's love. Neither can we. Perhaps today feels like a release from pandemic exile for you, a coming back "home" to the sacred space of Calvary. Well, God was with you on your couch in the pandemic, and God is with you here in the pews today – but the story of how God's people felt in exile and all that changed in them while they were gone and how they felt a little weird and unfamiliar when they returned...that is a story that can remind us of the love that God has for us even when we forget who we are and what our

purpose is, times when we are a little lost. Through exodus and exile, through cries of "let my people go!," through wilderness wandering and fleeing to foreign lands, and rebuilding Temples, the Israelite people have been through it all. In Hebrew, Israel – *yisrael* means "strugglers or strivers/ones who struggle or strive with God." So when the Bible says that the children of God are the Israelites, that means that God is choosing and calling and claiming as God's own a people who are "*strugglers and strivers*" – not, mind you, "winners or perfectionists." Strugglers. Strivers. Who are beloved by God. And called by God to give that same kind of love back to God and to others. That is *covenant*. (Not perfection but striving.) God extends God's love to God's people saying – I will be with you – no matter what – and because of God's unfailing love, we as God's people say back – Great, we're going to love you with our whole heart, minds, souls, and bodies and we're going to love our neighbor as ourselves. And

we're going to teach our children to do the same.

Of course the people do forget, they do mess up; this is where the prophets come in. You see God keeps trying to connect with us, and even sends us prophets with the sole role of keeping the kings (the people in power) in check and reminding us that we are God's and not gods. (As in we are God's (big G – we belong to God) but we ourselves are not gods (little g) we do not call the shots.

By the time we get to our Jeremiah text today, the people have been through exodus and exile and but the ones returning are a generation that wasn't around for the giving of the 10 commandments on Mt. Sinai or to be stargazing with Abraham to learn about how numerous their descendants would be. They do not have the first hand experience – and it's to these people that God says, *“It's okay, you didn't need be there...my law is going on your hearts. Maybe then you'll truly, truly understand that you are beloved. That there is nothing*

you can do to get away from my love or to lose my love. I just love you...I love you my beloved image-bearers who are strugglers and strivers and who wander and wonder and disobey and disappoint...through that whole cyclical journey again and again, I love you,” God says, “I love you. You are mine. I am with you.”

Through all of the pages of the Old Testament, the foundational Story of the People of God – through all of the up and downs, all of the commandments given and broken, all of the dreams fulfilled and the dreams left hanging, all of the enslavement and liberation, through the exile and rebuilding – through all of that, this is the constant: God created us in love, in God's very image, and God loves us still today and always in all ways. Period. End of sentence.

Being a covenant people means we hold up our end of things by loving God and loving others. But even when we don't – God's love still stands. It's a

two-sided covenant that can be broken from one side, but not from the other. It's not logical. It's love.

So you see, before we can even talk about what it means to be a Baptist, or even what it means to be a Christian, we must know in our bones what it means to be beloved – what it means to be created in the image of God and loved by God unconditionally. We are first and foremost God's children, and this identity – which connects us to all of humanity – is foundational and essential to any identities we layer on top.

Everything about yourself – those things you love and those things you hate or wish you could change – all of that – is God's image. And all of those worries and regrets that you walk around with – wondering if you'll ever measure up or if you'll ever find what you're supposed to be doing or your 'true calling' or whatever – with all of the mistakes you've made and hurtful things you've said or done or all the times

you've been silent or slinked back when you perhaps should have spoken up or stepped forward or taken a stand – in *all of that* – God loves you. God is pulling for you. God is rooting for you. God does not belabor our sin or dangle forgiveness out in front of us like a carrot to chase or earn. God douses us with forgiveness each and every day; we cannot escape it.

To be a Baptist is to first and foremost belong to God. And in belonging to God, who knows what we might become?

Amen.