

## **“You Are God’s Beloved”**

**Matthew 3: 13-17**

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This is, as you may know, the first Sunday after Epiphany in the Church year. The initial inspiration for the season of Epiphany comes, of course, from the journey of the Magi as they followed the star to the place of Jesus’ birth. It is the light of that revelation that stands as the backdrop for all that follows—including today’s focus upon the baptism of Jesus by John. Epiphany, of course, means revelation or manifestation and the texts of this season serve to highlight the ways in which God’s Spirit at work in Jesus was revealed or made manifest.

This morning, I would like to focus our attention on the epiphany that took place at the very beginning—in fact, before the beginning—of Jesus’ ministry. As a prelude to his journey out into the wilderness, Jesus pays a visit to his cousin, John the Baptist and makes the simple request to be baptized.

Keep in mind that John had become known in the region for preaching a baptism of repentance and forgiveness along the Jordan River. John, of course, is overwhelmed by the thought that he should be baptizing Jesus and suggests that, instead, Jesus should be baptizing him. But, Jesus insists that this is the way it should be and John, reluctantly, complies.

Matthew informs us that when Jesus had been baptized, he emerged from the murky waters of the Jordan to witness an astonishing sight. The heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending upon him like a dove and then came voice that declared, **“This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”**

For those who might be confused as to why Jesus would need to be baptized at all, it might prove helpful to understand that the baptism of Jesus is not really about his need for forgiveness, but about his commissioning by God to the ministry to which he has been called. It is this experience of baptism by John in the Jordan River that provides Jesus with the identity and affirmation that will give shape to his ministry.

Now, it is sometimes easy to overlook this blessing as something that was nice, but not necessarily needed in the life and witness of Jesus. After all, the thinking goes, as the Son of God, Jesus already knew who he was and already had the confidence to carry out his mission. But, I’m not so sure that this was the case. In fact, I am inclined to believe that Jesus didn’t automatically know who he was and the details of what he was called to do. I am inclined to believe that this was something that he needed to figure out on his own.

If this was the case, it would only follow that, as a human being, Jesus would experience the feelings and emotions that come with being human. He would know fear and doubt and uncertainty as he grew in his own understanding of who he was and what he was called to do. For this reason then, his baptism and the affirmation that he received in that dramatic

moment, would prove to be something of an epiphany in his own understanding of who he was and what God was calling him to do. It was, I believe, a moment that would stay with him forever, giving him the strength and the courage, the confidence and the conviction to fulfill the calling that God had placed upon him.

**The baptism of Jesus, then, provided him with both the affirmation and the identity that would enable him to proceed with the mission that God had called him to.**

It is my premise, this morning, that our own baptism serves, likewise, to provide us with the affirmation and identity that we need in order to fulfill our own calling as those who have chosen to follow Jesus. Our own baptism can become an epiphany—a revelation of the fact that we are also God’s beloved, God’s sons and daughters with whom God is well pleased. The whole ministry of Jesus was dedicated to communicating just this very simple, very basic and yet undeniable reality: **We are loved, affirmed and blessed by God!**

**How is it, then, that so many of us seemed to have missed the memo? Why is it that the true significance of this reality seems, so often, to escape us?**

Oh, we have our little slogans and verses to remind us that God loves us, but, too often, these slogans and verses fail to truly convince us that this is, in reality, the case. Somehow, what we may know, intellectually, fails to be known experientially. We know about God’s love for us with our heads, but not so much with our hearts.

In his book, **“Life of the Beloved,”** Henri Nouwen suggests that it is difficult to hear the voice that reminds us that we are God’s beloved in a world where other voices are always shouting at us, telling us that we are no good, that we are ugly, or worthless, or despicable...voices that tell us that we are nobody. These are the voices, says Nouwen, that lead us into the trap of self-rejection. He writes, **“Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity or power, but self-rejection. Success, popularity and power can, indeed, present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are a part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions.”**

Indeed, the pursuit of these solutions is often inspired by our deep desire to prove that we are, in fact, lovable, desirable and worthwhile human beings. If I don’t feel loved...if I don’t feel worthy...then maybe I can prove to you that I am by being successful, by being a winner and not a loser, by being popular and powerful. Oh the games that we play—the hurtful, destructive games that we play—as we act out our fundamental need and desired to be loved and affirmed.

If only we could move beyond the sense of insecurity and unworthiness that often drives us and actually learn to trust in the fact that we are loved unconditionally by God who positively delights in us, we would see a remarkable transformation in the world around us.

Can you imagine what it would be like to experience love and acceptance as naturally as the air that you breathe? Can you imagine the ways that this experience of love and acceptance would then transform our insecure attitudes and our fearful ways of living life? This world, without question, would be a better place...a more beautiful place...a more loving place...a place not unlike the kingdom of God.

God's unconditional love holds the potential, then, to change everything—even us. But in order to truly experience this unconditional love, to know it not only with our heads, but with our hearts as well, we must let go of some of the images of God that we may have been carrying around with us. Brennan Manning, in his book, "The Furious Longing of God," suggests that one of those images not worthy keeping is that of God as a **"small minded book keeper, a niggling customs officer riffling through our moral suitcase, a policeman with a club who is going to beat us over the head every time that we stumble and fall, or a whimsical, capricious, and cantankerous thief who delights in raining on our parade and stealing our joy."**

Is that a picture of the God that you carry with you? If so, I suspect that it will be most difficult, if not impossible, to ever experience the unconditional love of God. This understanding, you see, will only add to our fear and insecurity even as it serves to convince us of our own unworthiness and unacceptable nature.

Perhaps it's time to cultivate a more accurate understanding of who God really is and what it is that God asks of you. Our scripture lesson from Isaiah 44 can help with that process. In powerful and beautiful ways, this passage paints a picture of the true nature of God...

**"Do not fear,"** God says to God's people, **"I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God."**

I love this passage—it is one of my favorites in all of scripture—because it speaks to me of the personal God who knows me by name...the personal God who has promised to walk with me through whatever challenge or hardship that I might face...the personal God whose love for me and for you is unconditional. Five chapters later, the writer lifts up yet another vivid description of the personal nature of this love that God has for us. God suggests to God's people that they are inscribed on the palm of God's hands—tattooed, if you will, into God's being.

If you are looking for a more accurate and helpful way of understanding the nature of God and thus, the nature of God's love for you, you might want to begin with Isaiah's perspective. You might want to spend some time simply meditating on these passages and allowing them to seep into your consciousness. What does it mean that God has called you by name? That God has inscribed you on the palm of God's hand? What does it mean that God has promised to walk with you through flood and fire? What does it mean that God has redeemed you?

The chances are that if you spend some time with these passages and are willing to reflect upon the questions that they raise, you will begin to discover the God whose love for you is

truly unconditional...the God for whom you are indeed, the beloved...the God who is, in fact, well pleased with you.

This is, I think, a very appropriate focus on this Sunday in which we lift up the “Baptism of our Lord.” For, I would contend that just as the baptism of Jesus provided him with the affirmation and the sense of identity that he needed, so our own baptism serves to provide us with the affirmation and identity that we need.

Now, I realize that not many of us spend a whole lot of time reflecting upon our own baptism. Some of us can’t even remember the experience as we were baptized as infants. But it is important to take the time to reflect upon and reclaim the meaning of our baptism—whenever it took place. **For our baptism serves to remind us of the fundamental affirmation of God that we are God’s beloved, God’s sons and daughters with whom God is well pleased. And it is this affirmation that pours the foundation of our identity as Christian people—the foundation of trust and confidence in the fact that we are loved, included and accepted by God and there is nothing that can ever take that understanding away—not even the neurotic and narcissistic culture of which we are a part.**

Martin Luther, no stranger to the challenges of living faithfully as a follower of Jesus, would begin his most trying and demanding days by placing his hand on top of his hand and saying to himself, “Remember that you are baptized.” It was a simple gesture, but one that proved to be invaluable to this great reformer. His choice to remember his baptism was one that gave him the faith, courage and resolve to follow the lead of God’s love and to allow it not only to transform him, but to transform the world around him.

In a moment, I will invite you to remember your own baptism. We will share in the United Methodist ritual in which we remember our own baptism and reclaim the significance of our identity as those beloved by God, those with whom God is well pleased. This is not a ritual of “re-baptism” because baptism is a ritual that need not be repeated. As one of my colleagues has suggested, it is important understand that there are no “do-overs” when it comes to trusting that by God’s grace, we are loved, included and accepted. Rest assured that it “took” the first time!

After we share in the ritual of reaffirmation, Luke and I will move down the aisle and administer the drops of water that invite you to remember your baptism and be grateful. As we do that, you are invited to sing the musical refrain from **Water, River, Spirit, Grace** as an act of prayerful worship. It is my hope that in this ritual, you will be able to experience not just with your head, but your heart as well, the awareness that you are God’s sons and daughters, that you are God’s Beloved, and that with you, God is well pleased.

For once this foundation is poured, once our identity is secure, we can then be about the important being instruments of the love that God set loose in the world in the revelation of Jesus Christ.

**Amen!**