

Sermon for January 13, 2019 – “Beloved”

1st Sunday after Epiphany, Baptism of our Lord, Year C – Texts: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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The warm sun is shining and there’s not a cloud in the sky. I wear a white robe and I’m standing in chest-deep water. It’s the perfect temperature, comfortable and refreshing at the same time. I’ve been following John for a while and his message of repentance resonates deep in my heart. I wonder how I can apply his words, **“Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight his paths…”** to my own life. John’s been baptizing people in the Jordan River and I’ve seen the impact it’s had on their lives. And yet, John keeps saying that someone is coming after him. Someone who is mightier. Someone who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Whatever that means I believe him. John is holy, honest, and certainly, passionate. Today is my day to be baptized along with many others. As John places his hand on my head and speaks his words of repentance with conviction, I go under the water. I feel abundant peace in my heart and I feel so grateful. Grateful that God has brought me to this place and to these people. I don’t understand everything, but I know it is good and true. My head is still dripping with water and I look around at the others who’ve just been baptized or are waiting for their turn. My eyes stop on one of the men whose turn is coming up. I think I heard someone say that His name is Jesus. It suits Him perfectly. He doesn’t say a word, but He captivates me, draws me in with His peaceful presence and demeanor. There’s something about this man named Jesus. What is it? I can’t quite put my finger on it. He comes before John and John’s entire countenance changes. John always has this amazing reverence for anyone who comes to him, no matter who they are or where they come from but his reverence for Jesus increases exponentially. The two seem to know each other well and John lovingly embraces Jesus. It’s almost as if they were related. John prays over him as Jesus goes under the water. Jesus comes up and suddenly, the clear skies become even clearer if that’s even possible. And the brightness coming from above is like nothing I’ve seen before. A great light shines on Jesus. It’s a warm light that draws my heart closer to Him even though I physically don’t move a muscle. I’m surprised to realize that I’m not afraid. Then I hear a voice, so strong and so gentle, **“You are My Son, the Beloved – with You I am well pleased.”** I can’t believe I’m witnessing this miracle. I feel so privileged, so honored, like I’ve been invited to some royal event.

My eyes remain fixed on Jesus and I wonder, could He be the one John has been talking about? The one mightier than he? Maybe, but He responds to this voice with such humility and openness. It’s almost as if He’s in prayer or conversation with this voice coming from the sky. If that’s true is this the voice of God? I wish someone would speak words like that to me. I wish God would call me beloved and be that pleased with me. I long for that kind of love and as longing for it blooms in my heart, I can’t help but grow in hopeful expectation. Perhaps since I’m standing so close to Jesus here in the water of the River Jordan maybe God will notice me. And perhaps if I follow Jesus out of this water wherever He’s going maybe His Father will notice and be pleased with me, too. Maybe He will even adopt me as His beloved child. So many questions flood my mind and yet my heart knows without a doubt that I must follow Jesus. The love that I feel between Jesus and this voice and the reverence that John shows Jesus, they convince me.

I don't need to fully understand. I just need to trust with the gift of faith. These crowds that gathered on the banks of the river are here for a reason. Can it be that they, like me, are searching? Can it be that they are looking for something? Someone to tell them who they are? Most people see us as misfits and trouble makers. They consider us outsiders, outcasts unloved by God without a place in the religious order of things. We're on the outside looking in hoping against hope that someone will see and accept us. So when they hear of a Holy Man preaching on the outside, we go to see what He has to say, that maybe He'll say something different about God, that maybe He'll have a different story. Maybe this John the Baptist will tell them that there's something different about us, that there's more to us than meets the eye, more than what marks us as outsiders.

Sometimes, I think it's important to place ourselves in the gospel stories as a way of gaining a bit perspective. It's one of the reasons I occasionally offer a narrative sermon and why I enjoy writing and preaching them. It's not too hard to identify with the people in today's story – is it? these people standing on the banks of the River Jordan? Like them, we live in a society that makes distinctions, that tells us who we are based on what we do, where we live, how much money we make, what we buy, etc., etc. But even if we can't imagine standing on the banks of the Jordan, we know what it's like to seek affirmation, don't we? We're bombarded by messages telling us who we should be; messages in the media, messages in our families, messages from our leaders, even messages in church. As we sift through all these messages, we look for ones that might tell us how we're accepted, how we're loved, if they tell us at all. Sadly, most don't. Most tell how we can be better which really means that we aren't good enough.

As Jesus steps down from the crowds and into the water, God prepares to show the crowds **and us** precisely what it means to be gathered up, what it means to find an identity in God. As Jesus is baptized, God declares from the heavens, **“You are my Son, the Beloved – with you I am well pleased.”**

John's sermon is about the coming Messiah. Yet today, God preaches with His own voice. And God's sermon is short and clear, “This is My son. I love Him, and He is wonderful.” God's sermon is preached not just to Jesus but to each and every one of us. As we're baptized, as we live, each as God's named and claimed people these clear yet profound words are spoken **about** us and spoken **by** God. In the book of Matthew (19:14), Jesus says, **“Let the little children come to me and do not stop them...For it is to such as these, that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”** And since Jesus is the perfect image of God the Father, we can believe that our Heavenly Father is, indeed, saying to us “Come to me, my daughter. Come to me my son.” And just as we can imagine Jesus' face lighting up when those children came to Him, we can be confident that God's face lights up when we go to Him, too. Paul says it best in his letter to the Romans (8:14-17), **“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is the Spirit Himself, bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him.”**

Now, as we well know, there's nothing we can do to **control** God's love. We cannot earn God's love. We cannot make God love us more, in the same way that we cannot make God love anyone **else** less.

This is the scary part! This is the part that feels dangerous! This is where things start to unravel for too many people and why so many have so many misconceptions about God's love. God's love for us is unfathomable. Untamable. But it's also **unconditional**. And it's by this unfathomable, untamed, unconditional love that Jesus is revealed to the crowds on the banks of the Jordan. And, it's by this same untamed love that reveals us as belonging to God. To each one of us God says, "**You are my child, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.** You are always welcome with Me".

I've said before that there's a "God-shaped hole" in each of us. It is based on a quote from Blaise Pascal that says, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator made known through Jesus Christ." And so brothers and sisters, here's the thing, in baptism, God adopts us into His family. We become His sons and daughters. And that longing we have, that longing for someone to remind us that we are beloved? Let there be no doubt that this longing is satisfied in Jesus Christ!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.