

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17

Matthew 3:13-17-NRSV: ¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Matthew 3:13-17-The Message (MSG): ¹³⁻¹⁴Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan River from Galilee. He wanted John to baptize him. John objected, "I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not you!" ¹⁵but Jesus insisted. "Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." So, John did it. ¹⁶⁻¹⁷The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God's Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life."

Shortly after a recent seminary graduate had assumed his first pastorate, he and his wife went to visit his family one Saturday. His mother sensed that her daughter-in-law was unhappy, but not wishing to be meddlesome, she pretended not to notice. As they departed, she heard her daughter-in-law say, "All right, we can go by the church and you can practice baptizing me just one more time. But remember this, when you have your first funeral, you are not going to practice burying me."

Today's scripture reading takes us back to the day of Jesus' baptism. Prior to this point when Jesus was still a child, we are told that his parents escaped with him to Egypt because they were warned by an angel that King Herod, fearing that Jesus would one day try to take over his throne, wanted to have Jesus killed. Herod was depending on the wise men to return to him and tell him where to find the Christ child; but when they didn't, Herod became very angry and ordered that all boys in Bethlehem, two years and younger be killed.

At a later time, after Herod died, an angel again appeared to Joseph in a dream telling him to take the child, Jesus, and his mother Mary and return to the land of Israel, which they did, settling in the city of Nazareth. The next time Jesus appears in Matthew's story is in the story of his baptism.

This was an awkward moment for John, not because he and Jesus were related, but because he knew Jesus was someone special. John was the announcer, the one preparing the people for Jesus' arrival on the scene. John felt he was the one who should be getting baptized by Jesus.

But Jesus said, according to Eugene Petersen's interpretation of the bible, the *Message*, "God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." Jesus knew God's plan for his life, and he was ready to get on with it; he wasn't afraid. Through his baptism, he was confessing sin on behalf of the nation of God's chosen people.

Also, Jesus was showing support for what John was doing, calling people to repentance. Jesus was launching his public ministry; and he was identifying with the remorseful people of God, not with the judgmental Pharisees who were there, watching all of this taking place. Jesus,

who was perfect, didn't need to be baptized for the forgiveness of sin, but he did it in obedience to his Father, God. And Matthew tells us God was very pleased with his Son. In fact, Matthew says, "a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'"

I am intrigued by this notion of God using his voice. This is not the only place in the Bible where we read about God speaking. The creation story tells us that God spoke creation into existence; for example, God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light." God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And all that God created was good.

God spoke to Moses through a burning bush. God spoke to his chosen people through the prophets. And how about this excerpt found in Psalm 29 about God's voice in a great storm:

- ¹ Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
- ² Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;
worship the Lord in holy splendor.
- ³ The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord, over mighty waters.
- ⁴ The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
- ⁵ The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- ⁶ He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.
- ⁷ The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.
- ⁸ The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness;
the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- ⁹ The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple, all say, "Glory!"

In all of these examples, God speaks, and things happen. When God spoke at Jesus' baptism, God not only blessed Jesus by calling him God's beloved; but when God said, "in whom I am well pleased," he was blessing Jesus' obedience to fulfill God's will, for that moment and what was yet to come.

Let's take a look at that first thought. God blessed Jesus by calling Jesus His Beloved, meaning, Jesus was dearly loved by God. The bible tells us that we too, are dearly loved by God. In 1 John 3:1 we read, "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"

In Ephesians 1:3&4 we read, "How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love." And, of course, we read of God's love for us in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

God speaks to us again and again through his Word that we are his beloved children. Listen, my friends, listen closely. God calls us His beloved children; not tomorrow, not after we

become strong spiritually, not after we die, but NOW! This means God loves us perfectly and accepts us unconditionally today and takes great delight in us, not because of our performance, but because we are his spiritual children.

How does that feel when you hear that? Do you believe it? I know there are many people who suffer with rejection and guilt, which can make it difficult to hear this truth, and even more difficult to accept this truth. Is this an issue for you?

For those struggling with this, it's not that God has not revealed how much He loves them; rather, it is that they do not give themselves permission to be loved unconditionally and to be forgiven totally. Many still feel that their sins are obstacles, and they just are not good enough to be accepted by God. Now, it's possible to deny that God could possibly love us, but it's impossible to stop God from loving us and calling us His beloved children.

When we don't allow ourselves to receive God's blessing of being his beloved, we can't see our worth; we can't imagine having value and purpose to do God's will. If we cannot receive God's love, we cannot share it, and we do not fulfill our life purpose in God's will.

The great spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen wrote a little book titled, "Life of the Beloved." It's one of my favorite books. The heart of Nouwen's teaching in this book is his conviction that regardless of our religious tradition, we are beloved by God, but our ability to share that gift of belovedness with others is only as great as our ability to claim it for ourselves. Why is it always easier to believe someone else is beloved by God than to believe I am? Nouwen believes "self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life, because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "Beloved." He speaks of listening for that voice and believes once we hear it, we will keep trying to hear it ever more clearly. "Like discovering a well in the desert, once you have touched wet ground, you want to dig deeper."

Hearing God's voice in our soul, blessing us as his beloved, destroys all the lies and manipulation evil throws at us to convince us we are worthless. We see ourselves through God's eyes. We see others through God's eyes, and our reason for being is changed. We want to be obedient to God's will for us.

I want to share this true story with you. There was a gentleman, I'll call him Roger, not his real name, who came to Fahrney-Keedy for rehab following a major stroke. He was a quiet man. He attended worship almost every Sunday morning and bible study on Wednesdays when he could. Other than that, he kept pretty much to himself in his room.

The look on Roger's face after worship when he greeted me, often said more than the simple greeting he shared with me. Many times, I was curious about what he was thinking.

One day after bible study Roger asked me to stop by his room because, he had something he wanted to discuss with me. So, I did. He had questions about baptism. He heard me talk about baptism in bible study and in a sermon. When we discussed it in bible study, there were various denominations represented, so, of course, there was discussion about how each denomination practiced baptism; but Roger wasn't interested in discussing the differences in how and when churches baptize congregants.

What I soon discovered was that he was questioning his own value in God's eyes. You see, Roger was a veteran from the Vietnam war. He served on the front lines and saw many things that no man or woman should ever see, leaving him with memories that haunted him over and over again.

Worse yet, Roger was tormented with wonderings about whether he had ever killed anyone in battle. He told me how usually when he was fighting in a battle, he was shooting into trees or high shrubbery, and he never really saw whom or what he was shooting. He didn't even

really know if he was shooting at soldiers or civilians. He felt tortured by the very thought that he may have killed someone.

Seeing himself as scum of the earth, worthless, a man beyond forgiveness, he wondered, could God possibly love him? Could God forgive him? Baptism, symbolizing the washing away of the old self and rising to the new self, gave him hope. He wanted to be baptized.

I never had anyone from Fahrney-Keedy ask me to be baptized, nor did we have a baptistry there, but that was not going to stop me from baptizing him. So, along with a witness, we met in the chapel one afternoon. This man taunted by memories and pain made his confession of faith and I poured the waters of baptism over his head, as he wept.

We left him alone in the chapel when we were finished, where he heard the voice of God calling him his beloved child. The memories did not go away, but now he knew he was loved by God, changing the way in which he faced those memories, changing the outlook he had on his life.

My friends, the voice of God calls out to you, saying that you are his beloved child. If you haven’t already, give yourself permission today to see yourself as a child of God who is totally accepted, forgiven and loved unconditionally. Then when the evil one comes into your thoughts, reminding you of past sins and failures, and filling your head with lies about who you are, you will not be fooled; instead you will be equipped to throw aside the lies. You will declare who you are in Christ, and with confidence, live as one who has been blessed by God. Amen.