

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Matthew 3:13-17

*<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. <sup>16</sup> And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him, and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

The relationship I had with my dad was filled with highs and lows. We sometimes said or did things that were hurtful to one another; and there were moments when we said or did things that were a blessing to one another. I always sought my dad's approval and love. He didn't always express what I longed for in ways that I wanted. However, I have a memory that I will always cherish.

In later years of his life, he would call me on my birthday. As soon as I said hello, I would hear him begin to sing happy birthday to me. There was nothing special about how he sang it. It simply was his voice—rich with his love, perhaps even his longing that we could spend more time together. I could hear and feel his love in his voice.

The world is full of voices. We hear them and we pick and choose which ones we will listen to. There are voices that speak to us almost on a daily basis. Members of our family, our friends, our co-workers, our church family, and others speak to us, telling us we are loved, encouraging us, expressing their expectations of us, holding us with compassion, expressing their frustration. Those of us who have young children and teenagers may hear rebellion in their voices.

There are voices we hear from the rest of the world. There is the voice of our consumer-based society that demands that we produce more so we can spend more. There are the voices of our peers that entice us to act on values that we know are contrary to our faith and our upbringing.

These voices include, but are not limited to, the voice of advertising that tells us what we should buy, what we should eat, what we should expect from others, even what we should think about ourselves. These voices try to convince us that we need all of these things, the more the better, to truly be happy and fulfilled. Yes, wherever we go, we are surrounded by voices. What are the voices that you hear talking to you? How do you discern which ones to take seriously? Those that we value help to shape us into the person we are.

Today's scripture from Matthew points us in the direction of listening to a voice greater than all other voices. It is the voice that was heard at Jesus' baptism. It was a voice that sounded foreign amid the other voices that the people were accustomed to hearing. It was a voice that affirmed something few had yet to affirm. It was the voice of a holy parent affirming and revealing to the world the real identity of this holy child—the One being baptized. It said, "This is my Son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased."

Stop for a moment and just think about this particular voice. This wasn't just another willy-nilly voice. This is the same voice that "spoke" creation into being. This is the same voice that called Moses to rescue and to lead the Israelites through the wilderness and to the promised land.

This is the same voice that called out prophets and spoke through them words to instruct, warn, and communicate God's heart to a people who wandered away from God. In Psalm 29:4, the psalmist spoke of this voice, saying: "The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty," saying in essence that if ever there was a voice to be heeded, this, God's voice, would be that voice.

Beginning when our boys were infants, I remember holding them in front of a mirror, pointing and directing their attention as much as was possible, to see themselves in the mirror. And as I did this, I would tell them how beautiful they were. I told them they were loved, a gift from God, and that they were good, perfect, and would one day do good things.

I knew that as they grew up they would hear many other voices in the course of the day. They would hear voices that would invite them to do what the popular kids were doing, which wasn't always the right things. They would hear voices that invited them to forget their moral foundations. They might even hear voices that invited them to use drugs or alcohol. Amid all these voices, I wanted them to hear my voice each day reminding them who they really are.

Jesus, upon his baptism, heard the voice of his Father, communicating His affirmation and love for His one and only Son. We read how Jesus was blessed by His Father and with his Father's blessing. Jesus received power as he began the mission God laid out before him.

The story of Jesus' baptism is found in all four Gospels; however, Matthew is the only writer that records the conversation between John the Baptist and Jesus prior to the actual baptism. We find that John was reluctant to baptize Jesus. He felt unworthy to do it. He felt instead that Jesus should be baptizing him. He knew Jesus was special—the Promised Messiah.

Indeed, as we all know, Jesus was special. John was calling people to repent; and as a sign of their confession and repentance, he was baptizing them with water, signifying the washing away of the old self and rising to the new self.

John's idea for baptism was not new. It may have emerged out of the Jewish ritual for cleansing by immersion in a *mikveh*, or ritual bath. It was a form of purification, usually performed more than once in a lifetime.

There was also a Jewish sect called the Essenes of Qumran. They also emphasized ritual purity, using immersion baptism even though they lived in the desert where water supply was extremely limited.

The ritual of baptism was used for Gentiles who sought to convert to Judaism. They were required to undergo the ritual for cleansing as part of their initiation. However, we don't know if this practice influenced John because evidence of baptism for this reason really did not emerge until years after John was doing it. We just can't be sure.

So, the people of that day, including the Jews, were familiar with the practice of baptism for purification. People came to be baptized by John because they knew they had messed-up. They knew they needed to confess and repent of their sin. They wanted God's forgiveness and salvation. It may sound to us as believers like a simple and harmless step, but it wasn't.

When a person came to be baptized, he or she had to put aside his or her pride. Admitting sinfulness, particularly in a public setting, was risky. Observers may view these admissions as a sign of weakness and failure in the one being baptized. Strong, ignorant, judgmental voices attempted to dish out shame and strip one of honor in the community. At that time, any dignified person, especially a man, would do anything he could to acquire honor and avoid shame. The truth is it took guts to go to John to get baptized.

While we might be quick to criticize those who allowed pride to get in the way of being baptized, today for the same reasons, there are those who refuse baptism.

Jesus really didn't care about any of these earthly anxieties, fears and pressures. He stepped right up to the opportunity to be baptized. Ironically, he had no sin to confess, but those watching may have wondered what he did that would require him to need purification. Jesus wasn't worried what the people watching would think or how they would judge him when he was baptized along with all sorts of people with varying degrees of sinfulness. Jesus stood as a brother with those who came, and he set an example for all who were watching.

Prior to his baptism, we read in verse 15 that Jesus said: "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." What did he mean? Jesus wanted everyone then, and he wants us to hear that making things right with God, is important; but being right with God is not only about being obedient to God's law. It also has a lot, if not everything, to do with having a personal relationship with God. Jesus did not need to be baptized because he had broken God's law, but because he wanted to express, even make public, his desire to be in relationship with God. As our brother, Jesus encourages us to seek the same.

We read then, that after Jesus was baptized, a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." And with that, Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he began his ministry, according to God's plan.

The voice of our heavenly parent speaks to us, too. If we seek God, if we will listen, if we will throw out all the garbage in our imperfect lives, including our pride that separates us from God, then we can hear the voice of God, too, and we can hear him telling us that we are his beloved children. And when we hear this heart-desired blessing from our All-Powerful God, when we embrace all that it means, we too open ourselves to the Holy Spirit's indwelling, and with joy we join our brother, Jesus, in doing the work of spreading God's love through what we do and say. There is power, great power in God's voice, which frees us to love and to be loved.

In his book, *The Life of the Beloved*, Henri Nouwen writes, "Every time you listen with great attentiveness to the voice that calls you the Beloved, you will discover within yourself a desire to hear that voice longer and more deeply. It is like discovering a well in the desert."

Henri Nouwen, one of my favorite authors, was a Dutch Catholic priest, professor, writer, and theologian. He was a deeply spiritual man. He walked away from the rigors of his professional life to serve the last ten years of his life as a pastor at the L'Arche Daybreak community. He ministered to people with profound developmental disabilities. I want to share with you in closing, a true story he shares, also in his book, *Life of the Beloved*.

Nouwen wrote, "Not long ago, in my own community, I had a very personal experience of the power of a real blessing. Shortly before I started a prayer service in one of our houses, Janet, a handicapped member of our community, said to me: 'Henri, can you give me a blessing?' I responded in a somewhat automatic way by tracing with my thumb the sign of the cross on her forehead. Instead of being grateful, however, she protested vehemently, 'No, that doesn't work. I want a real blessing!' I suddenly became aware of the ritualistic quality of my response to her request and said, 'Oh, I am sorry, let me give you a real blessing when we are all together for the prayer service.' She nodded with a smile, and I realized that something special was required of me. After the service, when about thirty people were sitting in a circle on the floor, I said, 'Janet has asked me for a special blessing. She feels that she needs that now.' As I was saying this, I didn't know what Janet really wanted. But Janet didn't leave me in doubt for very long. As soon as I had said, 'Janet has asked me for a special blessing,' she stood up and walked toward me. I was wearing a long white robe with ample sleeves covering my hands as well as my arms. Spontaneously, Janet put her arms around me and put her head against my chest. Without thinking, I covered her with my sleeves so that she almost vanished in the folds of my robe. As

we held each other, I said, 'Janet, I want you to know that you are God's Beloved daughter. You are precious in God's eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house and all the good things you do show us what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are a very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you.'

As I said these words, Janet raised her head and looked at me; and her broad smile showed that she had really heard and received the blessing. When she returned to her place, Jane, another handicapped woman, raised her hand and said, 'I want a blessing too.' She stood up and, before I knew it, had put her face against my chest. After I had spoken words of blessing to her, many more of the handicapped people followed, expressing the same desire to be blessed. The most touching moment, however, came when one of the assistants, a twenty-four-year-old student, raised his hand and said, 'And what about me?' 'Sure,' I said. 'Come.' He came, and, as we stood before each other, I put my arms around him and said, 'John, it is so good that you are here. You are God's Beloved Son. Your presence is a joy for all of us. When things are hard and life is burdensome, always remember that you are loved with an everlasting love.' As I spoke these words, he looked at me with tears in his eyes and then he said, 'Thank you, thank you very much.'

Isn't this what we all want? God embraces us, he holds us close in his arms within the folds of His robe when we come to him with an openness to hear his voice and receive his blessing, that we are his beloved, precious to him. We experience this, we can hear his voice and receive his blessing as we hear it from within ourselves, or through the very real recognition of his presence in our lives, or as it is spoken to us from another brother or sister within the Body of Christ.

There's a lot of voices vying for our attention; but amid all the voices we hear in our world, this voice, the voice of God, is the best voice to hear. It is, after all, the voice of salvation! Amen.