

McCabe United Methodist Church

On Being Beloved

Sermon on Luke 3:1-6, 21-22 (1/9 & 1/10/16; Baptism of the Lord)
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This past Wednesday in our 2nd-year Confirmation class, we spent much of our time talking about baptism. We read the story of Jesus' baptism and we talked about what typically happens here at McCabe when someone is baptized.

Often it's a baby being baptized...when it's a baby, the parent or parents come forward with the baby, along with Godparents or sponsors...the pastor is up front with everyone and asks the grown-ups some questions...then the actual baptism happens with water...and then, in many of our services, everyone sings a song while the pastor walks through the congregation to “introduce” the newly baptized person.

Many of us know what happens during a baptism...*logistically*. We know who's present, who speaks, who responds – we know the physical, tangible stuff of the ritual. The rest of it is kind of a mystery.

In The United Methodist Church – as in many churches – baptism is two very specific things: baptism is a blessing and a call.

It's a *blessing* because it's a reminder of God's love for us from before we were even born – so it's a reminder that we *are* blessed. Baptism is also a *call* to be faithful to the God who loves us. And we don't get this idea out of thin air: the idea that baptism is both blessing and call is straight from the story of Jesus' own baptism.

When we talked about baptism on Wednesday night during Confirmation class, we read the story of Jesus' baptism – though, instead of the one we just heard a few moments ago from the Gospel of Luke, we read the story of Jesus' baptism from the Gospel of Matthew.

All four of our biblical Gospels tell a piece of the story of Jesus' baptism... and, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the stories are very similar: John the Baptist baptizes Jesus and, when Jesus is coming up out of the water after being baptized, the heavens open and God's Spirit descends upon

Jesus – in the form of a dove...then, God says something like: “You are my own dear Son, and I am pleased with you.”

I love that part: “You are my own dear Son, and I am pleased with you.” I like it even better in other versions of the Bible where God says, “You are my Son, *the Beloved*, with you I am well pleased.”

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That is the blessing of baptism. Simply being *beloved*.

Very often we think of the word “beloved” in terms of romantic relationships – and it's not inappropriate to think of “beloved” in that way. To be the object of someone's romantic affection is to be their *beloved*.

But being someone's *beloved* extends far beyond romantic relationships because to be “beloved” does not need to imply romantic affection.

Being *beloved* is simply being one who is loved: one who is loved by a friend, by a colleague, by a teacher or mentor, by a family member – whether biological or chosen. And knowing you are someone's *beloved* is foundationally important. Knowing we are beloved can help define the very core of our being.

Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison was once asked in an interview what had made her such a good writer. What books she had read, what methods she used to form her writing practice.

Her response was incredible. When asked what made her a great writer, Toni Morrison said, “I am a great writer because when I was a little girl and walked into a room where my father was sitting, his eyes would light up. That is why I am a great writer. That is why. There isn't any other reason.”¹

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¹ Found in Donald Miller's *Searching for God Knows What*. 128

Toni Morrison became a great writer because she was confident in the reality that she was her father's *beloved*. The twinkle in his eye. The spark that made his heart sing.

I am so thankful to feel the same way about my own immediate family. We don't get along perfectly all the time...but, when we see each other, our eyes light up. We are grateful. We are who we are today because we know we are loved.

The same is true for so many of you: though the people closest to you do not always say and do the “right” thing, you are who you are because you know there are people who love you and who want the best for you in this life. Be grateful for those people.

Unfortunately, of course, there are many in this world who are not loved by others, or who do not sense and trust in the love of others. In fact, I have no doubt there are some in this room today – not to mention folks outside this building – who may be struggling mightily to rest in the assurance that they are loved.

If that is you, I hope you can hear in today's message a particular word of assurance. Because whether or not any of us *feels* that we are the beloved of another human being...we are – without a doubt – *God's* beloved. And it doesn't even matter what we have done or what we have not done in this life. God's love for us is real.

Notice in the reading from Luke chapter 3 that God's claim on Jesus – God's love for Jesus and God's word of being *pleased with* Jesus – is simple fact...and that love and pleasure is not based on anything Jesus had *done*.

After Jesus was baptized, and as the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove, God did *not* say, “This is my Son, the Beloved; I am well pleased with him *because he is a really great carpenter and because he can perform miracles and, most importantly, because he is going to save the world.*”

We might think it would make sense for those to be the reasons God loves Jesus...but God didn't say those things. God simply said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; I am well pleased with him.”

And I think it would be just fine if we thought of it this way...as God saying, "This is Jesus. I am pleased with him simply because he is my Beloved Son."

Jesus' own baptism was a serious blessing from God...and it came at a critical time in his life. The very next things that happen are the devil tempting Jesus in the desert and Jesus starting his public ministry: calling his disciples, teaching the crowds, performing healing miracles, feeding the hungry, and challenging the religious and political leaders of his day.

That was all part of Jesus' call...and he needed that baptismal blessing from God before he got started on it. Isn't the same true for you and me?

As I said earlier: baptism is both blessing and call. As children of God, we rest in the assurance that we are God's beloved children. That is the *blessing*. Our call is in response to that blessing.

See, as people who choose to follow Jesus today, we are called to the same kinds of ministry to which Jesus was called: inviting others into Jesus' story...teaching them about Jesus...being with the sick and lonely...feeding the hungry – and, yes, when appropriate, we are even called to challenge the religious and political leaders of our day.

And our ability to live this call as faithfully as possible rests in our ability to fully claim the abundant blessing of God's love...which can be surprisingly difficult to do, depending on our life circumstances.

Years ago I read a book called *Life of the Beloved* by the late Catholic priest Henri Nouwen. In this book, Nouwen makes the central point that each of us *is* God's Beloved – that, if we are to deeply believe one thing about God and about ourselves, that one thing is that we are Beloved.

For about the last ten years of Henri Nouwen's life, he was the pastor of a community dedicated to the care of people with developmental disabilities...and, in *Life of the Beloved*, he tells a story about blessing I want to read to you right now. He writes this:

“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 ... 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.'

Nouwen closed this story by saying, “As I said these words, Janet raised her head and looked at me; and her broad smile showed...she had really heard and received the blessing.”²

² Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Life of the Beloved*, pp. 57-58

Today marks a special church celebration called Baptism of the Lord. As part of that celebration, in just a moment, you'll be invited by the ushers to come forward and receive your own blessing.

This will feel a bit like when you come forward for Holy Communion:

If you have a monetary offering to bring, you'll bring that with you and then place it in one of the offering plates up front.

When you get to the front, you will be offered a special blessing. For those of you who have been baptized, you will receive the sign of the cross in water on your foreheads while particular words of blessing are offered.

If you have *not* been baptized, please know you are invited forward as well: I simply request that you fold your hands over your chest when you approach the front. The blessing you will receive is slightly different, but equally important.

That we are God's Beloved children is the foundational fact of our existence. God loves us and there isn't anything we can do about it – that is *a/ways* our good news.

The same good news is true for everyone else in this sanctuary, everyone else in Bismarck-Mandan, everyone else...period. We are *all* God's