

“Beloved Child of God. That’s It!”

Matthew 3:13-17

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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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13-14 Jesus 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!*”

15 But 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.

16-17 The 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.”

I. COME TO THE WATER WITH JESUS.

Back in the day when Christianity was new to Ireland, the Irish folk, when immersing a babe at baptism would *leave out the right arm.*

Leave it plumb out of the water! Why? So that it would remain pagan for good fighting!

In our day, we observe baptism in any *number* of ways. Full immersion, dipping, sprinkling, dunking, splashing!

Our kids, here and all over the world like to call it

“bath-tizing.” And, well, it should be! Not that we *have* to physically immerse our entire bodies for Baptism to be meaningful, or to “count,” but, spiritually, we do take a bath! And we *should!*

But, do we put our whole selves in? When we’re baptized, or when we come to the Font each year to renew and affirm this sacrament—this “sign of God’s self-giving”—a reminder of who and Whose we are?

Or, do we hold back, not wanting to fully claim our identity as a child of God? What’s the “right arm” that we are tempted to keep out?—Where is *our* resistance to being bath-tized?

I wonder if, for us, our resistance, hesitance to “go all in”, is due to the *disbelief* that we are truly, wholly, and completely loved?

We come to the font. We stick a toe in, and then an ankle—up to the knee. And another toe, and another foot, and maybe a hip, and a back, a coupla shoulders, even put our face in, if we’re really brave.

But then, what do we *do*? We stick our right arm out! Right up there, straight up in the air. Gotta keep something out! Gotta hold onto that old life, my old self; the “pagan part,” as it were. Might need it for fighting, after all! And what are we fighting? Perhaps ourselves—in this funky “spiritual Hokey Pokey” as it were.

If I put my WHOLE self in—give it all to God—that

might just be a little much. Don't you think? I might have to finally accept that *all of me* is acceptable to God. Useful to the Lord and in the family—just the way we are.

And then, if we get past that self-doubt, there's another worry: I might overcommit. Get too busy. Be tied-down. Might end up on a committee for life! Not keep enough time, or space or resources *for* myself. Might give up my right to choose, to have an opinion, to back *out* of the water if things get rough again.

All through this season of Epiphany, we remind ourselves—through our Baptism and our gathering in community—our worship, singing hearing the word, that *we are God's beloved, chosen, created and dearly loved children*.

That we are God's chosen ones—not chosen to the *exclusion* of others—or over and above another Body of Christ—for ALL are chosen. But, chosen for a time such as this, for a life of living and loving such as this, in a community such as ours. Chosen to be ourselves.

II. BEING THE BELOVED.

Why do we need so much reminding of this? Because let's face it: we have a hard time with loving ourselves. And, to argue with that is to argue with God. Our maker! "God don't make no junk!"

Yes, it's an overused saying from the 70's, but it's true!

— Henri J.M. Nouwen, an amazing mystic and meditative guide, has written a beautiful book about just this, called *Life of the Beloved*

"I kept running around it in large or small circles, always looking for someone or something able to convince me of my Belovedness. Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "Beloved." Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence."

"Jesus did not *begin* to be loved at the moment of his baptism, nor did he cease to be loved when his baptism became a memory. Baptism simply named the reality of his existing and unending belovedness."
— Rachel Held Evans

And, we need to be reminded over and over of that fact—when we want to keep our right arm, or even our whole selves out of the Water, free from immersing ourselves in that divine love.

And, we need to be reminded often. I was challenged this week by a meditation practice to find a favorite song or book that speaks from God's perspective to us as the Beloved, and to read or listen to that.

I immediately thought of my favorite Psalm—139—which gets to the core of who we are and have always been. I invite you to look out the window at God's beautiful creation that includes us and hear these words as speaking directly to you and by you.

Psalm 139 – The Inescapable God

- ¹ O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
³ You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O Lord, you know it completely.
⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.
⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.
¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light around me become night,"
¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is as bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light to you.
- For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- ¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;

that I know very well.

- ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
¹⁶ Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.
¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
¹⁸ I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
 I come to the end^[a]—I am still with you.

Know, in your bones, that you are first and foremost a Beloved Child of God. End of story. That's it!

Nothing else matters as much. Nothing can touch that or change it. Override that core character, or overrule your innate identity.

When you feel like outside forces or inside voices are trying to trump that fact of nature, it's time to re-member and remind ourselves of who and whose we are. It's essential that we resist that criticism, which is often not external at all, but self-induced!.

III. THREE GREAT LOVES

Last Sunday we came to the manger. We came, bringing gifts to Jesus—of ourselves, our commitment and devotion. We brought our prayers and gifts of our spirit to God, for God's use and purpose in the coming year.

Today, we come to a better understanding of loving ourselves as God loves us—unconditionally.

Next week, we will delve-into loving our neighbor more fully through the doorway of this beautiful passage the

MSG/Choir sang this morning:

Because you are God's chosen ones

Because you are kept in his care

Clothes yourselves with mercy and kindness

Humility meekness and prayer

Bear with one another; Forgive one another;

forgive as the Lord forgives you...

Christ's peace must reign in you

Christ's ordain in you

Christ's love remain in your hearts

Then, on January 26th, as we worship and gather in our Annual Meeting, we will wonder together at the blessings that we find ourselves immersed in. How we are all blessed—through the ups and downs of life and loving community—when we focus on these three great loves that the Holy One has laid out for us. The only Mission Statement a Christian should ever need:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength and your neighbor as yourself!

IV. WHY RENEWAL?

So, why do we come to the font, now, today? How do we best respond to a divine show of compassionate power made evident in the heaven-opening, earth-colliding, Jesus-emerging, Spirit-descending, God-speaking moment of the baptism of the Lord? (as one pastor puts it!)

We respond by coming, like Jesus, with Jesus to the water. Why? Because like Jesus we need someone else to tell us often who we are and that we are God's dear ones, in whom God delights.

We need to hear this often and from many mouths. You are a beloved child of God. That's it! Nothing more need be said. You're going to hear it from me today and then we're going to tell it to each other. Many voices! Many times.

Every year when we do this, I can't tell you the number of tears I see in your eyes as you come to the Font. I wonder if it's so *rare* that we hear those words—that holy reminder—that we are deeply moved, almost pained, by hearing it.

We need to hear, obviously. One can never have enough reaffirmation. Every year; for the rest of our lives! At *least* once a year! This renewing our baptism. Reaffirming who we are and Whose we are.

“It's our awakening. It's our opportunity to trust that God has good things in store for us—that we are not *fool's gold* shining only in the glint of the sun, but that we are the *real* thing, the real heart, mind, body, and soul that God already loves.” (Tracey Dawson)

Let us sing as we prepare to come to the font.

“Come, Be Baptized” (hymnal #676)