

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Whose we are and Who we are

"You are my beloved Child; with you I am well pleased." – Luke 3:15-22

Today as we remember the story of Jesus' baptism, I want to speak also about baptism in general. During this message I am going to ask you to sing a refrain that I have often sung when speaking about baptism. The piece is by Tom Walker and is entitled "Child of God."

I am a child of God. Nothing can shake my confidence.
I am a child of God No one can take my inheritance
Never alone I'll stand, strengthened by God's own hand.
I am a child, I am a child, a child of God.¹

There is a little church that serves the inner city of Nashville, Tennessee. Many of the congregation struggle with racism, homophobia, poverty, substance abuse and victimization in their daily life. Many of the congregation daily struggle with shame, guilt and horrible self-esteem. And so, baptism is important to them. Baptism is a visible sign that each of them – no matter what they might struggle with in life, no matter what they think of themselves — each of them are children of God. Baptism tells them whose they are. And because they know whose they are, they also know who they are. In order to make that point really clear, as part of their baptismal ceremony in this little church, the minister says to the person baptized: "You are loved, precious in God's sight, beautiful to behold." I can imagine that some of the people in the inner city of Nashville request baptism just so that they can hear those words addressed to them.

One day the minister of that little church, Janet Wolfe, was called up to the hospital to visit a woman who had been recently baptized. It turned out that she had been badly beaten by her boyfriend. When Janet walked in the door of the hospital room, she was shocked by the woman's appearance. Her eyes were blackened; her lips were swollen; she had stitches closing gashes on her eyebrows and upper lip. The first thing the woman said to her minister when Janet walked in the room was

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“Tell it to me again!” And at first Janet didn’t know what the woman was talking about. “Tell you what again?” “Tell me what it means that I am baptized.” And so, Janet repeated it to her. “You are loved, precious in God’s sight, beautiful to behold.” At first, Janet thought, she might find the words bitterly ironic in face of the terrible evidence that she was not beautiful, that she was not loved, that she was not precious in her boyfriend’s sight. But the woman repeated it slowly to herself, speaking painful through her swollen and stitched lips. “I am loved, precious in God’s sight, beautiful to behold.” And as she said it, she seemed to grow stronger, the words reminded her of a precious truth which life had tried to beat out of her, but which she knew deep in her soul was true, and Janet said that she did in fact become beautiful, beautiful in spite of her bruised and battered face, beautiful because she claimed for herself the promise that in spite of the degradation and the injury that she had suffered, she was loved, precious and beautiful. Because of that reminder of whose she is, she was also able to remember who she was: a person whose dignity and worth transcended all the problems in her life.

I don’t know whether Janet ever had the opportunity to visit the man who beat that woman, but if she did, I hope that she also found a way to say to him, in a way that neither excused his violence nor absolve him of the need to change, that he too is beloved, precious in God’s sight, beautiful to behold. Let’s claim that truth for ourselves, as we sing again:

I am a child of God. Nothing can shake my confidence.
I am a child of God No one can take my inheritance
Never alone I'll stand, strengthened by God's own hand.
I am a child, I am a child, a child of God.

We are all, each of us, battered and bruised by violence and cruelty, by greed and insensitivity, by what we refer to collectively by that much misunderstood word: sin. Sin simply refers to anything that degrades and distorts who and whose we really are. And we are constantly surrounded by what degrades and distorts who we really are.

The other day I was leafing through a National Geographic magazine² when I came across a picture of a Haitian man whose job is to clean latrines. The picture shows him covered in human waste, because every night, he climbs into the latrines in order to clean them. I don’t imagine that he enjoys that, but he does it, because it is

² See <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2017/10/sanitation-open-defecation-india-vietnam-haiti-toilets/>

how he makes a living, and he has gotten used to it. There is a sense in which we all live like that: Maybe we don't literally climb into pits full of human waste every night, but lots of us climb every day into degrading workplaces, abusive families, or gatherings fueled by cruel humour and substance abuse because we don't know any other way to live. We have grown up so immersed in communities corrupted by sin, that we can't imagine how to escape them.

One of the most graphic experiences I have had of the way people live degrading situations is in the largest dump in Central America, in Guatemala City. There are hundreds of people who spend their days in that dump. As each garbage truck brings in a load, a dozen or more people line up alongside the truck, and as the load is dumped, they swarm over it competing with each other to collect anything that has any value: food items, pieces of plastic, paper, and broken things that other people can't be bothered to repair. For a bale of plastic or paper they may earn a few dollars. The food items become the evening meal. The broken items are sold to the repair shops and recyclers who do business just outside the gates of the dump. There are whole families who are so destitute that they can't live any other way. There are children who are born to that life and can't imagine any other kind of life. There is a sense in which we all live like that. We are surrounded by garbage, and our highest goals are to find a bit of garbage that is slightly more valuable than the rest. We are trapped in communities devoted to corrupt goals.

Like the destitute people who pick through the garbage in the Guatemala City dump, like the man who climbs into the latrines every night, like the woman sent to the hospital by her boyfriend, we are surrounded and covered and coated with garbage, waste and violence that degrades and distorts who we really are. It permeates us and pervades us. We cannot escape it or avoid it, but we can wash it away, by claiming this promise, that in spite of it all, we are loved, precious in God's sight, beautiful to behold. Martin Luther said that baptism is a "once-in-a-lifetime experience that takes your whole life to complete." Daily we must wash away what is unworthy of a life that is pleasing in his sight and emerge cleansed. Daily we must die to an unworthy way of life and rise with Christ. Daily we must rely on grace and generosity to forgive us and make us anew. Daily we must confess the corruption which surrounds and stains us and be forgiven and set free. Daily we must claim the identity confirmed on us at baptism, as God's beloved children.

This morning we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, and we celebrate all our baptisms, yours and mine, those which you remember and those which you don't, and even

perhaps, those which haven't yet happened, and you didn't know until just now that you really need.

We celebrate that through baptism, God says these awesome and wonderful words to each of us, "You are my beloved Child, and I am very pleased with you." Those words were spoken to Jesus at his baptism, and they are part of the meaning of every baptism ever since, for baptism is the sign of grace that we are loved, no matter how far we run, or how bitterly we disappoint. This love does not diminish with distance or fade with time. It endures. Wherever we go, whatever we do, we are loved. It may be hard for us to believe or accept or claim that love, but it is there and we can trust it right to the very end. Let's sing again:

I am a child of God. Nothing can shake my confidence.
I am a child of God No one can take my inheritance
Never alone I'll stand, strengthened by God's own hand.
I am a child, I am a child, a child of God.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus went to the famous prophet John the Baptist. John was the leader of a social movement that sought to challenge and change the corrupt values on which society was based, values of greed rather than generosity, of hoarding rather than sharing, of selfishness rather than service, of violence rather than blessing. John was a bit odd. He dressed funny, in clothes made of camel hair, and he ate funny, nothing but locusts and wild honey. But his oddness was part of his social critique. He made his own clothes and gathered his own food because he wanted to distance himself from the corrupt society he was challenging. His movement sought to replace that corrupt society with one that was more fair, less violent and more generous. Baptism was the way you joined his movement. So when people went to him, they confessed their personal participation in such corruption, and they went through the waters of death and rebirth to start anew. Baptism was the sign that people, whatever garbage dump or slum they lived in, whatever latrines or abusive families or workplaces they jumped into each day, were committed to leave that life behind, to repent, so that that they could be healed and forgiven of whatever kept them from a whole and holy life, in order that they could be a part of a new community, a new creation.

Our baptisms too are baptisms into a new community, a new creation. That may seem like a strange thing to say, because in one sense the church is anything but new. It is an ancient institution. But the church is not primarily an institution. It is primarily a movement, and each person who joins a movement carries it forward and shapes it in their own unique way, just as a new baby changes a family forever. In exactly the same way, with each person who takes into their heart the good news

that they are loved, precious in God's sight, beautiful to behold, the church is renewed and changed forever.

The very first thing that the gospels say about Jesus is that he was baptized. It is not something that he does, but something which is done to him. At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus was baptized into this movement, he becomes a part of the Baptism movement of John, he symbolically rejects the corrupt values of his society and embraces the vision of a society in which every person is loved, every person is cared for, every person is valued as a child of God. And he hears the good news of the grace in which he lives, the grace that pours out on him like a shower, warming and blessing him: "You are my beloved Son, I am very pleased with you." It is that recognition of grace and love that serves as the basis for his loving service to others. Because he knows that he is loved, he can spend his life without fear or anxiety, loving others. Love is like a fountain which wells up within him and then flows out from him, showering those around him, saturating them, soaking them with the healing waters of an eternal and inexhaustible love.

In baptism, each of us receives this good news, "you are my beloved child. I am very pleased with you." That is who we are, beloved children of God. The challenge for the rest of our lives is to remember who we are, to live up to that identity which we have in Christ, to know that we have received the baptism of grace. Let's sing one more time:

I am a child of God. Nothing can shake my confidence.
I am a child of God No one can take my inheritance
Never alone I'll stand, strengthened by God's own hand.
I am a child, I am a child, a child of God.