

January 16, 2022

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

“Being Claimed by and Receiving God’s Pride”

As a pastor, the first time I perform a ministry function is forever etched in my memory.

So, I will never forget the first time I baptized someone.

Christmas was on a Sunday that year, and so as we celebrated Jesus’ nativity, we also celebrated another birth through the sacrament of baptism.

A daughter of the church I was serving would be home visiting her parents for the holidays and asked if her newborn baby girl could be baptized during the Christmas morning service.

I remember little Kaitlin’s ivory satin baptismal gown, made for her by her proud grandmother.

And I remember looking into her sweet, sleeping face, and praying she wouldn’t wake up and scream as I gently placed the barest minimum of baptismal water upon her little head.

Maybe my hand was cold or maybe it was just that little bit of wetness, or maybe she was a light sleeper.

Whatever it was, I’ll never forget little Kaitlin jerking as though startled and looking at me with accusing eyes before voicing her displeasure.

Beloved child, beloved daughter of God.

I also remember my first time baptizing someone older than a baby – a teenager who had not been baptized as a baby and so was professing her faith and being baptized as she completed confirmation class to join the church.

Remembering my own teenage baptism in which the pastor shook all the water off his hand before making the sign of the cross on my forehead and so wondering if I had really been baptized, I assured Elizabeth that she would be getting wet!

Just before kneeling beside the font, Elizabeth's mother came rushing up with a fluffy yellow towel and placed it around her daughter's shoulders to protect her pretty new dress from the water.

It was a good thing she did, because the water from my cupped hands did run down Elizabeth's face and would have gotten her new dress wet.

Beloved child, beloved daughter of God.

And I remember the first, and to date still the only, time when I was baptizing someone, they baptized me back!

Brenda was a teenager with intellectual disability.

When I counseled with her, she'd been able to express an understanding of what it meant and what would happen, and a desire to be baptized.

I have no idea what she may have been thinking at that moment, but in response to my baptizing her she sent a wave of water back into my face!

As I and the congregation, and her embarrassed mother and sister standing with her, recovered from our shock, slowly there was a ripple of joy-filled laughter followed by applause.

Beloved child, beloved daughter of God.

And I definitely felt the water on my face during my unexpected second baptism!

Every baptism I do includes words about the person being a beloved child of God.

Although in the Presbyterian church we don't believe you have to be baptized in order to receive grace and be welcomed into God's Realm, it's a particular time in the

life of faith when we get to hear our Creator's love and pleasure and pride in us simply because we're alive.

The most well-adjusted and healthy children regularly hear from their parents that they love them and are pleased with and proud of them.

Not hearing such love and pleasure and pride from parents can result in great harm to the mental health of a child.

Likewise, it's harmful to the mental health of a child when they experience inappropriate and unhealthy expressions of love and pleasure from parents or other significant adults.

Sometimes children who have not heard or experienced appropriate expressions of love and pleasure and pride from parents or other significant adults spend their whole lives seeking such affirmation.

Hopefully at some point they do at least hear and believe that God loves them, is pleased with them, is proud of them.

But in our American culture in which more and more young people are not being raised in any form of faith community OR are being raised in one that condemns them for their gender identity or sexual orientation that is certainly not a given.

That's why it's important for us to regularly hear and to share the Gospel stories of Jesus' baptism.

Particularly as told by Luke's Gospel, Jesus simply got in line with people from all walks of life presenting themselves for John's baptism.

It was an act of solidarity with people who may have been feeling discouraged and frustrated by life lived in this world, who may have even felt abandoned by an uncaring God.

At his baptism, the One proclaimed to shepherds by angels as the Messiah stood in line with all who had come to John seeking reasons to have hope.

Jesus stood in line with all who had come to John wondering whether this baptizer might even be the long-promised Messiah who would deliver them from their various oppressors.

Then, after all the people including Jesus had been baptized, we're told that while Jesus was praying and as there was a manifestation of the Holy Spirit as a dove descending upon him that a voice was heard claiming him as the Beloved One with whom God was very pleased.

It was a powerful affirmation of Jesus' choice to begin his earthly ministry in humility and in solidarity with suffering humanity.

This morning as we've suspended in-person worship again we may have joined this service feeling "baptized" by "fires" of discouragement with a global pandemic now in its third year of disrupting life throughout this world coupled with our nation's several recent years of vitriolic and obstructive political polarization.

We may have hopefully joined this worship service seeking some solidarity with and from the One who when he stood in line with everyone else to be baptized was personally acknowledged and affirmed by God.

We may have hopefully joined this worship service seeking as we offer our prayers for others and ourselves to hear God claim us as "**beloved**" and is proud of us as we continue engaging in the struggles of our own faith and life journeys.

My siblings in Jesus, the Messiah and our Christ, this morning I proclaim to you that we worship and serve a God who adores us enough to become One with us on this earth, who continues to suffer and grieve with us during our times of trial, and who

is proud of us even before but especially when we endeavor to shine Divine Love into the hurting places of the world.

And I want you to know that I love you as my siblings in Jesus Christ and as we now prepare to transition from my serving with you as your pastor to your welcoming the Reverend Mel Smith and her ministry with you next month that I'm going to miss you and will continue to treasure each and every one of you.

I'm also proud of you and the ways in which you've persevered with me and in our transitional journey together that turned out to be more of an adventure than any of us could have imagined!

Although there's always more to do and that we could have done during this transitional time in Trinity's mission and ministry, you are ready to partner with Mel in leading your church forward into your future.

I like to think some of what sustained Jesus during the highs and especially the lows of his earthly ministry was hearing God's affirmation of his decision to be baptized:

"You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Later in this service, as those of us who've been baptized reaffirm the commitment made for us or we made for ourselves, using our bowls of water to remind ourselves that we're baptized daughters, sons, and children of God, may we hear again our Creator saying to us:

"Beloved child, beloved son, beloved daughter."

And may we recognize in those words God's delighted pleasure and pride in us simply for who we are.

To the God be the glory!

Amen.