

"Beginning as Beloved"

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Texts: Psalm 29 and Matthew 3: 3-13

Baptism: a sacrament across the Christian church (for us, it's a sacrament because Jesus did it, and he told us to do it). Baptism: another reason for church people to fight about worthiness and who is going to heaven and hell. Also a good way to argue about when is the right time, and what is the right method. And it all began with not only John the Baptist, but with this scripture and the baptism of Jesus.

It can get confusing because this scripture is one we talk about so soon after Christmas. One might even think that Jesus was baptized as an infant. That's not the case. In fact, it was some 30 years since his birth, and literally 30 years have passed between Matthew chapter 2 and chapter 3. But here we are, watching Jesus be baptized. I don't know about you, but it gets my mind going. Why would Jesus need to be baptized? John the Baptist asks the same question. And some would say this whole scene is to make sure we all know the rightful

place of John and Jesus in not only the Gospel narrative, but Christianity as a whole. Good for us!

And, Jesus, as far we know is immersed. Maybe that means we all should be. Maybe it misses the point. Boy do church people (and others) get caught up in the smallest of details. Some say, as I have, that this baptism is important because it signifies the beginning of Jesus' ministry. True. But I think often gloss over the most important thing that happened in this story: the word of God as Jesus exits the Jordan River. The Gospels differ on the exact words, so don't get caught up in that detail, either. But some of the words are in all the Gospels, "this is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." It's with these words that Jesus begins ministry.

Christian folk get all wrapped up in baptism washing us of our sin. Is this true even for infants? Some would think so as I have been asked to baptize infants who had passed away to allay the parents' concerns about their son or daughter's eternal home. "Wash 'em clean with the waters of baptism and get Satan right out of there!" Would it be that this were true. From the day of our baptism, we'd never sin again. We'd honor God every day, love one another, and

practice peace as the unicorns played in the field beside us. Or, maybe that's why some folk feel the need to be baptized so many times.

For me, and for the United Church of Christ, the meaning of baptism is stated right in the words we use during the sacrament, whenever someone is baptized. "Baptism is the outward and visible sign of an inward presence." That's right out of the book of worship. We are recognizing and public and in ritual the presence of God in a person. But we acknowledge that the presence is already there. I wonder where we got the idea that God cannot be present in a person unless or until some pastor says so while immersing or sprinkling perfect water? Regardless of where you come down on this, it still misses those important words, "this is my beloved, with whom I'm well pleased."

Do you suppose it's possible that Jesus, in his full humanity, needed to hear those words? Let's think about humans for a minute. What do we need from our parents, or other significant people in our lives? Father Richard Rohr would assert in his sermon on this passage that each of us needs to hear that they are beloved, "and the word needs to come from someone greater than you. In fact, it is a parent's number one job to communicate this to their children. He goes to say that Jesus didn't say a word until this ritual took place. Until his baptism, Jesus

didn't say much. After his baptism, he changed the world. Would it, could it be that even Jesus needed to hear he was beloved as he began his ministry? I don't know. But Father Richard continues, "Even Jesus needed to hear it. He couldn't be stopped after he did."

No matter what we think about whether Jesus needed to hear this, I have no doubt that people do. Father Rohr practiced prison ministry for 14 years in the jails of Albuquerque, New Mexico. He has said that he never met someone in jail who had heard that they were beloved, but he met a lot of people there who never did hear it. Put succinctly, "Until you know you are beloved, you don't have any good news for the world." You must start with the positive. So here goes, just in case you never heard it.

You are beloved children of God, whether you are in this church this morning, or you are not. No one can take that from you, and firm in that knowledge, no one can stop you from the ministry that is yours. Our job as the church (and you'll hear more about this in our new series starting next week) is to help people get that straight. You are beloved children of God. For if we start with negative, or hesitate about this fact, then people are likely to hesitate, or they stay negative. We must begin with the positive.

This doesn't mean that suddenly you are perfect and all is unicorns dancing in the desert. Life can be hard, and mistakes will be made. You will fall short of the glory of God somewhere in your life, maybe multiple times, but you cannot take away the fact that you are beloved. What if we in this little church or on this little screen in people's homes, shouted from the mountaintop, "You are the beloved children of God!" and people started to believe it? What if we acted as if those around us are beloved children of God irrespective of their present behaviors? What if we believed that God's love is not earned, but given? What if we lived as if we really believed we were beloved?

My friends, I'm sure there is a psychologist somewhere who disagrees, but I think they'd be hard to find. People need to know they matter. They need to know they are loved. They need to know they belong. It's doesn't just happen...especially in a world that spends so much time talking about how are not good enough, not loved enough, not faithful enough, not pretty enough, not Christian enough, not holy enough, not praying enough, not worthy. People are trying to scare the hell out of us, but really are scaring the hell into us. I have to stop myself before I really go off the rails here (we'll see if I do in person :))!

Let me instead just say it plainly: begin with beloved and so much more good will come to a world that up until now has spent so much time asking if you're good enough. We cannot control whether or not people hear these much needed words from their parents or caregivers, but we can control what they hear from us in this church, in this place, in this time: "You are God's beloved." You are God's beloved.

Hallelujah! Amen.