

“My Beloved”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Isaiah 42: 1-9 and Matthew 3: 13-17

And a voice came out of the heavens: “This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him.” In Mark’s gospel, almost the same words, “You are my beloved Son. In you I am well pleased. (Mark 1: 11).” There are a lot of people in this world who need to hear those words. Maybe you need to hear those words? Maybe I do? Whether or not that is the case for us, it certainly is true for many people in our world – even people of faith. So many of us have begun our lives and lived our lives from a negative position. This is a terrible travesty when we have grown up negatively in our families. It’s far more dangerous when people have grown up with a negative foundation for their spiritual journey. Today, we are going to be told for the first time, or be reminded, of the only purpose of the gospel, and even religion. It is to communicate one eternal truth: to God, we are beloved.

When we hear the scripture from Matthew, they get all sidetracked on the issue of baptism. Who should be baptized, when, by whom, should it happen more than once, and on and on. Those are arguments for another day. Whenever baptism occurs, the same thing happens. The words in our UCC Order of Worship remind us that baptism is an “outward and visible sign of an invisible presence.” We don’t become God’s by baptism, but our baptism signifies outwardly the invisible presence. As children, people make promises to raise us in faith. As adults, we promise to continue our spiritual journey. Confirmation was originally all about helping people decide for themselves whether to

affirm their baptism, or to be baptized. Well noted. The language of an invisible presence reminds us that God acts first.

Further, we don't do ourselves any favors by beginning our spiritual journey on a negative foundation. "If we just seek God out of fear or guilt or shame (which is often the legacy of original sin), we won't go very far. If we start negative, we stay negative." A spiritual mentor of mine, Father Richard Rohr writes, "We have to begin positive—by a wonderful experience, by something that's larger than life, by something that dips us into the depths of our own being. That's what the word baptism means, 'to be dipped into. (Daily Meditations, Center for Action and Contemplation, Thursday, October 28, 2021.)"

I would go on to say, who benefits from our negative spiritual foundation? A whole of people and institutions—not the least of which is the church. For a long time, the church has participated in a constant barrage of negative foundations. Inserting itself into the fray, the church in many of its forms put itself as the arbiter of belonging. Many in the church have a long history of telling people how bad they are and speaking of how the church can fix them. Often that meant money, and many of us know the history of indulgences—among other things. Instead, our primary role is that same primary role that parents have, "where every child [knows] that they are a beloved, eternally-existing child of God."

Father Rohr tells us that once we get that right, nothing can stop us, and no one can take it away from us because it is given only, always, and everywhere by God—for those who accept it freely. "My only job and any preacher's job is to try to replicate and resound

that eternal message of God that initiates everything good on this earth—You are beloved children of God.”

Is that a surprise to you? Did your mind start racing to a whole bunch of “buts”? But I’m... (fill in the blank). Or, but I’m not... (fill in the blank). Our prisons, in the most incarcerated nation in the world, are filled with people who have only heard the “buts” and have never been told that they are beloved. “They have never heard another human voice, much less a voice from heaven, say to them, ‘You are a beloved son. You are a beloved daughter and in you I am well pleased.’” Father Rohr writes, “If we’ve never had anyone believe in us, take delight in us, affirm us, call us beloved, we don’t have anywhere to begin. There’s nothing exciting and wonderful to start with, so we spend our whole lives trying to say those words to ourselves: ‘I’m okay, I’m wonderful, I’m great.’ The word has to come from someone greater than us.” That is why it is important that we in the church tell the world loudly that they (we) are beloved.

We are going to need to know we are loved by something greater than ourselves if we are to do the things that are ours to do. In Mark’s gospel story of Jesus, he hasn’t really said a word up until this baptism happens. He’s thirty years old. “Until we know we’re a beloved son or beloved daughter or even just beloved, we don’t have anything to say. We’re so filled with self-doubt that we have no good news for the world. In his baptism, Jesus was dipped in the unifying mystery of life and death and love.” In the words of Father Rohr, “That’s where it all begins—even for him! The unique Son of God had to hear it with his own ears and then he couldn’t be stopped. Then he has plenty to say for the next three years, because he has finally found his own soul, how own identity, and his own life’s purpose.”

I'm convinced that the lack of knowledge of our inherent belovedness from God is the source of many of our problems. Violent people often become that way to prove something to themselves or others. Other people stand back, shy away, and basically hide because they don't think they have anything to say. Still others completely feel a lack of self-worth. The truth is that self-worth cannot be self-generated. It has to come from someone or somewhere we revere. God tells us this often in our scripture. Humankind was pronounced "very good" in Genesis 1. The covenant between God and humanity has been restored more than once when humanity broke our vows. Jesus came, in the fullness of time, to a very specific location and people to remind those on the outside that with God they are on the inside.

Jesus took children into his arms. Children on that day were not thought of the way they are today. And yet, Jesus said, "unless you become like one of them, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." To the hemorrhaging woman, the woman caught in adultery, even the Apostle Paul himself, God continues to reach for us to restore us, but ultimately to love us. It is we who have put up the false boundaries of who is in and who is out. We've done it often to convince ourselves that we are good, special, and even loved. What if we believed we were loved in the first place? Then we wouldn't have anything to prove. Instead, we would act out of gratitude, mercy, abundance, and love.

So here I am to do the most important task that is mine to do: to remind you, or tell you for the first time, you are the beloved of God. No matter who you are. No matter where you came from. No matter what "faults" you have. You are loved. First and foremost, you are loved by God. Your task is to accept that love. Call it mercy, or grace, if you want to, but no

matter what, all you are asked to do is receive. Once we receive that love, I believe we can do great things. And, like Jesus, no one or nothing can ever stop us. For even death itself is conquered by love. That love comes from God, and nothing can ever stop it!

You are God's beloved. With you, God is well pleased. Amen.