

“Beloved”

Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

January 10, 2016

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Lake Forest, Illinois

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

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I was away this week for my annual study group – it’s called the Moveable Feast, made up of preachers from some of the finest pulpits in our denomination – Brick Church in New York, and Village Church in Kansas City, of Bryn Mawr Church in Philadelphia, and University Church in Chapel Hill; there are seminary presidents as well, and of course my beloved twin sister Karen. Together, we hone our skill at preaching, challenging each other to climb higher, and we linger long in Scripture, inspiring each other to dive deeper. It is a rich feast indeed, and I’m refreshed by this long-time company of friends.

In my absence, Corey kindly agreed to write the weekly email note to you, and I’m so glad he did, for it was more profound than anything I would have said. If you’re not yet on our list-serve for the weekly email, just let me know, we’d love to be in touch. Corey wrote:

“This Sunday marks the eleventh year that we share the experience of remembering ... our baptism ... and recommitting ourselves to follow

Christ. This powerful service is beloved by many as a transformational way to begin the New Year.”

Then he shared these words of Debie Thomas, who reflects on the meaning of baptism in this season of Epiphany, this season of God’s “in-breaking.” “Here’s my problem with Epiphany,” Debie writes:

*“I always, always have a choice—and most of the time, I don't want it. I expect God's revelations to bowl me over ... to dominate my landscape, such that I am left choice-less, powerless, sinless. Freed of all doubts, and pulsing with faith. But no. God has not insulted humanity with so little agency; we get to choose. No matter how many times God shows up, I'm free to ignore him. No matter how often he calls me Beloved, I can choose self-loathing instead. No matter how many times I remember my baptism, I'm capable of dredging out of the water the very sludge I first threw in. No matter how often I reaffirm my vow to seek and serve Christ in all persons, I'm at liberty to reject others and walk away.”*

Isn’t that true? Corey adds:

We always have the choice to follow Christ or not ... to commit ourselves as disciples to a life of generosity, compassion and wisdom ... or not. Life is full of challenges and there are lots of competing voices and values we encounter every day. So, what do we do? Personally, I think that gathering with our family of faith to remember that we are God's beloved and renew our baptismal vows together is one of the most effective and powerful things we can do. It's a great way to reset our course for the months ahead and reclaim our purpose and plan for the future.

Amen, Corey, Amen. Life *is* full of challenges, and there are endless voices competing in our heads. Voices telling us to strive for recognition or that money is the measure of our worth. Narcissistic voices, assuring us we are

already more successful, more beautiful, more deserving than anyone around us. Voices shouting that the world is a wreck and we should be very afraid. Voices whispering that we don't matter anyway – what makes us think we're so special? Judge-y voices, sneering that we'll never fit in to the sorority or office, the PTA or country club. Tempting voices, luring us to white lies that plaster the fake patina of our *persona* tighter and tighter until we don't even know who we are underneath. Yes, Corey is right: there are lots of competing voices, aren't there? And the question is, which one will we choose to hear?

Today, as we renew our Baptismal vows, we are declaring a choice. We are saying that, of all the voices chattering in our heads, there is one voice above all others that we will choose to hear: the voice of the one who long ago said to Jesus, “You are my son, my Beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

Oh, you might say, that's nice but that was God speaking to Jesus, not to me. And that is true. God was speaking to Jesus that day in the wilderness; and it was on Jesus that God's Holy Spirit alighted. But I learned something important this week that I want to share with you: that from the earliest days of the church, Jesus' followers trusted that the gifts Jesus received in baptism that day, he now passes on to us in our baptism.

My dear friend Cynthia Campbell says it this way: “The Spirit gives wondrous gifts [to Christ]: wisdom and understanding; counsel and might; knowledge and the fear of the Lord; delight or joy in God.” But these gifts don't end with Jesus. Instead, “these gifts that he received, Jesus intends to share with us. ... In the early days of the church, [these blessings] were called the ‘seven-fold gifts’ that were conferred on each person at baptism. They were birthday gifts, if you will, as people were born anew in Christ.”<sup>i</sup>

I love that image. As we join in Christ in baptism, Jesus desires to hand on to us the very gifts he received from the Holy Spirit. But it is up to us to receive them, or not. To welcome them, or not. To cherish them, or not. What do these gifts look like? Cynthia says,

“They are down-to-earth blessings. ‘Wisdom,’ in the biblical sense, is like a road map (or a Google map that actually works!). Wisdom is what helps us figure out how to live: how to tell right from wrong; what builds up rather than what tears down; what is honest, and fair, and generous. Counsel and might help us face difficult situations with strength and courage. To ‘fear the Lord’ is to honor God with our lives; to live in hopeful trust in God’s promises; to love as we have been loved.”

Now I know you “know” all this already – I’m not telling you anything new. But what I long for is this: that we see these gifts for the treasures that they are ... that we see what’s at stake in our receiving them or not. Rather than speak theologically about such things, let me tell you why it matters so urgently to me.

Three weeks ago, our beloved daughter Annie finished her Master’s degree. Two weeks ago, she got engaged to her boyfriend, a young man who is smart and kind and funny, which is just what I’d hoped for her. And next week ... next week she’ll be moving to New Mexico to start the job of her dreams. I’m a whirlwind of emotions. But I was helped a lot this week by a story my friend Tom shared with us. Tom and I have known each other a long time, before our kids were even born. And this is what he told us:

“My kids are young adults now. Sarah is halfway through ... Seminary. Nathan loves the church but is not sure he can believe in God at the moment. I am wondering about those invisible tendons that bridge faith from one generation to the next.

“It was summer of 2005. Sarah was 13. We were on our way back from Branson, Missouri, where we had a father-daughter trip. We saw some shows and went swimming in the motel pool, which required a brief stop to the emergency room for a few stitches. We played the funniest round

of miniature golf of my life. We ate dinner on a riverboat. Driving home I said, ‘I need to talk to you. You are getting older and there are some things I need you to know.’

“Even though she was only 13, I already realized one of the constants in parenting is letting go. We had to let go a bit the first time we left her with Tommy Miller. He was a kid in our church youth group who said he would babysit. Had to let go and trust her to Ms. Francis. She taught her in Pre-K. We had to let go and swallow hard the day we handed her the keys. Had to let go some more when she asked to stay out after curfew: ‘Dad, it’s the prom.’ A few years ago she paced her Ford Focus and headed for college in Iowa. God did not wire daddies to send their little girls to Iowa. I’m not ashamed to say, I shed tears daily that autumn. I know, the only thing worse than her going to college would have been for her to come to the breakfast table and say, ‘Dad, I’ve been thinking it over and I have decided not to go to college.’ She was doing exactly what I wanted for her; I just didn’t want what I wanted. Makes me hard to please.

“But before she was gone, I needed her to know some things.

“First: I said, I need you to know you are responsible for yourself. You are the only one who can live your life in a way of honor and faithfulness. Do not place the responsibilities on someone else’s shoulders. You are you.

“Secondly, the older you get the more decisions you have to make. Some of them are big, like where you go to college and who you marry. Some are small. But every decision has consequences. Sometimes the

consequences are good, sometimes not so good, on occasion they can be anticipated. But they are always part of a decision, so think about that as you make your choices.

“Third, if in the providence of God you ever have a child of your own, only then will you fully understand what I mean when I say I love you. When you have a son or daughter, there is a part of your heart that is born in that moment. My love for you comes from that part of my heart that you gave birth to.

“There’s one more thing,” I said. “It’s the most important.” “More important than your telling me you love me?” “Yes, I think even more important than that. I want you to remember that you are baptized.” I then told her the story of her baptism, how the ordinary water and the hands of her grandfather and the promises of the church declared the truth of her identity and calling.

“If you remember nothing else from me, I hope you will remember these four things.

“She was home for Christmas. She left for the airport before the sun was awake on Wednesday. She was going to visit a man who someday may be her husband; I probably won’t know for sure until I receive an invitation to the wedding. Before she left, we just held up four fingers

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Two thousand years ago, Jesus had a choice to make. He chose to stand in the River Jordan and be baptized by his cousin, John. He chose to receive the blessing of his heavenly Father, gifts of wisdom and understanding; counsel and might; knowledge and delight in the Lord. Now he’s passing those gifts

on to us. Priceless gifts that we can choose to receive, or set down ... that we can remember or forget ... that we can put in the closet or use every day.

I know what I hope my daughter will do. And if that's true for me, how much more can we trust what God dearly hopes for us too: for each of us is God's beloved child.

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<sup>i</sup> Cynthia Campbell, pastor, Highlands Presbyterian Church, Louisville, KY, in her 2016 Moveable Feast paper on Isaiah 11:1-10.

<sup>ii</sup> Tom Are, pastor, Village Presbyterian Church, Prairie Village, KS, in her 2016 Moveable Feast paper on 2 Timothy 1:1-14.