

1st Epiphany
Church of the Advent
January 13, 2019

Beloved

Is there anything better than praise from people in your life that you care about, and who care about you? Think about how much energy we spend over a lifetime trying to prove to the people we came from that we have been worth their time and trouble to bring us into the world and keep us alive and more or less intact? What comes to mind is a memory of beaming parents



singing and acting out endless verses of *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*, and realizing that every child up there had someone in the audience who thought they were the cutest, brightest, most talented child in the room. After the last verse there was lavish applause and praise all around, with the little people basking in the glow of compliments and angling for how to turn all that

concentrated approval into a trip to the real McDonald's or the Dairy Queen for a just reward.

Making people proud of us was easier when we were little and still at least a little bit cute; if memory serves, it got harder with age as the world got tougher, the competition for attention got fiercer, and the bar was slowly but steadily raised for expectations and accomplishments. And to be fair, something happens to angelic preschoolers the older they get and the farther they roam from the land of cute. They grow up and develop interests that make them unique individuals with their own personalities, their own preferences, and their own way of seeing the world. Eventually somewhere between eternity and the blink of an eye it gets harder to earn that praise we all crave, to find the affirmation for who we are--or who we have become--especially when the ones who love us most have become sentimentally stuck waiting for another verse of Old MacDonald.

So as we do our best to grow up, realize we are destined to win sometimes and lose sometimes, to please and to disappoint, and to fail at making all the people happy all of the time. One of my favorite family stories is the one about my older brother's 4th grade report card showing his quarterly conduct grades as B, C, D, A. He would never tell how he managed to go

from D to A; he said we wouldn't want to know what his motivation was. He did eventually manage to become the smartest one of the six of us, and enjoyed a long successful career as a college teacher.

The longing for affirmation eventually sends us all to a particular fork in the road where we choose one of two paths: one that tells us to give up on the impossible task of trying to please everyone else and just make ourselves happy; the other that leads us to *never stop* trying to please everyone else all the time, even when it puts our own desires on hold. In either case--on either path we take--we are all looking for meaning, purpose, and affirmation of our identity as completely unique human beings, born into a specific place and time for a specific reason. Sometimes it takes a lifetime to understand that neither path--if taken to its extreme end--leads us to fully understand what God might have in mind for our lives.

Today's gospel invites us to think about how this human experience of searching for identity and longing for affirmation might have played out in the life of Jesus. As much as we affirm and believe Jesus to be the Son of God, a person of the Trinity, the Savior and Redeemer of the World, the gospels still offer a picture of a young man navigating through his world with human emotions and human vulnerability. We know and believe who Jesus is and what he came down to earth to do, because we have been told the whole story all the way to the morning of the Resurrection. But early on in his story, Jesus did not claim his divinity. He often told the disciples to keep his teachings to themselves, and told those whom he had healed to tell no one of the miracle, and on multiple occasions he went off by himself to pray, as if it was just all too much for him. The term *Son of God* meant someone special in the Roman Empire, but not to the Hebrews, for whom there was only one God and God alone.

So imagine Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry, figuring out where to go, what to do, what to say to crowds of strangers who already thought that his cousin John the Baptist might be the Messiah they had been waiting for. The prophets, like Isaiah, had foretold his coming, but how would Jesus step out and declare to the world that *he* was the one sent to save it? And why would the Son of God choose to begin his ministry in the world with Baptism?

Baptism was born out of an old ritual of cleansing for the Hebrews. A literal washing--in a bowl of clean water at the entrance to the Temple, from a bucket drawn from a well, or by

walking into a river--was an act of cleansing both body and soul in acknowledgement that a ritual impurity as defined in the Book of Leviticus had been committed, such as touching a person contaminated with disease, or blood, or handling a dead body. This cleansing was required by Law before one could offer a Temple sacrifice. Later, washing in the water of baptism became a ritual for Gentiles to convert to Judaism, though in early days the men would also have to be circumcised as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham. John's Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins was a new idea, meant to signal a commitment to live a God-fearing life, more than just an opportunity to wipe one's personal slate clean of sin. John the Baptist understood that the world was corrupt and full of suffering, and that the people of God had made covenants with God that they had broken. They had known exile again and again, and had no meaningful influence or security in their world. Yet in their brokenness they longed for redemption and restoration of their covenant relationship with God. And God longed to redeem them.

At first it seems like a strange beginning for Jesus, blending in to the crowd, calling himself a sinner looking for the salvation of baptism, wading into the water. And then in one of the very few places in the gospel where the Lord God Almighty inserted himself directly and dramatically, the heavens parted and the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove, and the voice of God acknowledged Jesus as his Son, the beloved. *This is my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.* And there it was, praise from the one from whom he came--the one that meant the most to him, an affirmation of his identity and purpose. And all he had to do was to show up and signal his intention. He was as beloved as a preschooler with a high cuteness factor, beloved before his ministry even got started, before the miracles, the teaching, the sacrifice. It was as if God his Father had repeated the words that he had spoken to his people through Isaiah:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you,

I have called you by name;

You are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

The message here is that *who* we are, or what we do, is not as important as *whose* we are. We are all beloved children of God, regardless of the path we take at that fork in the road. We can spend our whole lives running from God and plotting our lives just to please ourselves, or we can spend our whole lives desperate to be perfect, trying to earn some sign of God's approval, and it matters not because we do not earn and we cannot control the love of God. It is free gift. Once we are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever, we cannot be unmarked. By grace, and the saving redeeming work of love through Jesus Christ, God is always ready and waiting to wash us clean and to call us beloved. All we have to do is walk down to the river and into the water, and occasionally sing our hearts out like a preschooler. Amen.