

Luke 3:21-22

“Beloved”

January 8, 2012

Maple Grove UMC

Is your refrigerator like ours? All the stuff stuck on it with magnets—photos and calendars and meeting reminders—seems to reproduce by itself, threatens to take over the whole fridge. We had to get a new fridge once and vowed to keep better control of it. Only the most important stuff, we said, would stay on the fridge. But it’s no use—it’s all important stuff. However, even on our fridge, the stuff does rotate from time to time. This year’s school pictures replace last year’s. The old dentist appointment comes down and the new one goes up. A neighbor child’s Christmas artwork gives way to a niece’s Valentines drawing.

On our fridge, only one thing has remained constant through all the changes. It’s an old Polaroid photo of my daughter Emily, taken in Sunday school on a Baptism of the Lord Sunday when she was about four years old. She’s wearing a darling blue dress, her hair in pigtails and a tender, sweet smile on her face. And around her picture is a faded construction paper frame with the words that came to Jesus from heaven: “You are my beloved child. I am pleased with you.”

Everything else eventually goes. But I just can’t bring myself to take down that picture and those words. They remind me, every day, that my

daughters are beloved, and that I am, and I know God is, well pleased with them—even on days when they're not at their best. And still deeper than that, I believe, that picture reminds me that even their crusty old dad, even I, am a child of God, beloved even when I haven't been at my best, pleasing to God even when I don't see how I could be.

Today we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord, when Jesus took his place in line for baptism along with all the rest of us. Baptism is a rich and wonderful sacrament, with many different meanings. The word 'baptize' means literally to wash or bathe. In Acts 22 Ananias tells Paul to "Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away." Baptism symbolizes the death of our old, sinful self and our new life in Christ. Romans 6 says, "We have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." And baptism is the way every single one of us is initiated into Christ's holy Church and therefore is a sign of our unity in Christ.

For me the remarkable thing about Jesus' baptism in particular is the voice that came from heaven as he came up out of the water. You are my

beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” Dearly beloved . . . well pleased. Who doesn't need and long to hear those words?

It's important to note that the Father spoke these words to Jesus not at the end but right at the start of Jesus' ministry. At this point in his life, Jesus hasn't told any parables, he hasn't performed any miracles, he hasn't yet picked up the cross. Before Jesus has done anything to prove himself, already he is baptized. Before he's done anything to deserve it, already he is God's beloved child. Before Jesus has even had a chance to measure up or not, already God has said, "With you I am well pleased."

I'm convinced that what causes a lot of the sin and suffering in our lives is that we forget we are beloved and pleasing to God. Because we don't remember that, we feel insecure, anxious, always a little unsure of ourselves. So some people drink to try and calm that anxiety. Some people have sex with people they shouldn't in hopes that they'll feel loved, if only for a few moments. People are greedy for money, or step on others to get positions or promotions, or have cosmetic surgery to change the way they look, thinking that's what it takes to be somebody. It's not. You're already somebody. You are already and forever a beloved child of God.

There's nothing you have to do to be pleasing to God and there's nothing you can do to stop being beloved of God—it just is.

This is part of what church is for. We come to church to be reminded, to hear and sing and experience all over again how much God loves us. The church's ministries are really just finding as many ways as possible to communicate to others how beloved they are too. We gather youth together so they won't feel compelled to prove how wonderful they are by how much stuff they've got or what they wear or how tough they can act, but to know they are wonderful just by being God's children. We collect food and clothing and money for the needy, not only so everyone can eat, but so everyone will know they are worthy and not alone. We visit the sick and aged so they don't forget they're still pleasing in God's sight, and in ours. In his final words Jesus told us to go and baptize all nations in his name—not, I think, as some claim, to try to make everyone be like us, but so that everyone can know they are God's beloved child, that God is well pleased with them.

Paul Jones tells how no matter what he did, it was never good enough for his mother. If he got all A's and one B, it was the B she'd talk

about. He came to meet her at the train station one time at 4:00 in the morning. He threw out his arms to greet her, and she said, “When are you going to get a haircut?” On the day before she died, he received a letter from her that concluded, “I often wonder how I went wrong with you. Mother.”

Paul became a workaholic, rarely taking a day off, feeling anxious if he wasn't busy doing something all the time. He was miserable. His spiritual breakthrough came when he dared one day to ask, “Why? Why do I put such pressure on myself? Why doesn't anything ever feel good enough?” Suddenly it became clear to him that his whole life had been one long attempt to be ‘worthy’ of his mother saying just once, “Paul, I love you.” But nothing worked. And suddenly he realized why. She had needed him to be perfect so her own father would say to her, “Good job, Ruth. I love you.” But the old codger said it—probably because he'd never heard it from his own parents.

On a trip home, he climbed the hill to his mother's grave and prayed. At last he looked down at the grave and said, “Mom, I forgive you; I never understood until now.” Then he looked out beyond the hills, to where his own five daughters were scattered throughout the country. “Please forgive me,” he whispered, “for I know now that all you ever really wanted was to

hear the words that I had really wanted to hear: “I love you. I am pleased with you.”ⁱ

O dearly beloved, I am here to say the words to you today, whether they come to you as life-changing brand new news, or as a gentle reminder of what you’ve always known: God loves you. You are God’s child, beloved, and with you with God is well pleased. You don’t have to earn it, you don’t have to prove yourself worthy of it, you don’t have to jump through any hoops to make it so. It just is. And baptism is the sign, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

In just a moment, I’m going to invite you to move to one of the four fonts and bowls set around the sanctuary. There you will have the opportunity to touch the water, to remember your baptism, and to receive a blessing, to hear the words we all need and long to hear: God loves you. You are God’s child, beloved, and with you with God is well pleased. And there’s nothing you can do about it!

ⁱ W. Paul Jones, “Yearning to be Told,” *Alive Now* (March/April, 2000), 28-29.