

My Beloved

January 8, 2017

From The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels, F. Dean Lueking paints a picture of the “anxious” Reformation leader Martin Luther. I come across this reference again and again. Lutherans seem to have a lot to say in this neighborhood, and that’s a good thing. But the reference says that Luther “struggled through the lonely months of his safe keeping,” in the Wartburg castle when he was challenged and literally and figuratively, at least, imprisoned for his own safe keeping. And he would write, “I am baptized,” scribbled across the top of his desk. Remember his baptism as he battled back against spare discouragement and loneliness I dare say.

Rather than a sentimental journey or an effort to recapture lost enthusiasm (either ours or that of our parents or our godparents), “remembering our baptism” is seeking equilibrium on a storm-tossed sea, getting our bearings, remembering who (and whose) we are, and grounding ourselves in that assurance, an important perspective for our days. When my life is falling apart and when the world is crumbling all around me, or when work or relationships seem to be flying down the wrong track, “remember your baptism.”

So, you might not be surprised to hear that I take baptism very seriously. I mean the significance of baptism is a central part of my relationship with God. And this passage from the gospel describing the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River by John is a favorite of mine.

I say this not only because I am an ordained minister in the denomination of the American Baptist Churches, USA. And I say this not just because I was raised in an American Baptist family and came to faith in the practice of baptism by immersion (as a believer) at the age of 12. That’s all true. It was a powerful moment for me, a decisive time where I stood on my own feet presuming to speak or to decide as a responsible adult. And whether you do this in the practice of baptism by immersion as a believer, or in the confirmation of a baptism that was earlier in your life, it is a profound moment. For those confirmands who have this coming and whose class will be meeting after worship today, I guess you have a lot more responsibility with the words that you need to offer in your statement of faith, but it’s nothing quite like being 12 years old, dripping wet, standing in front of the whole congregation to make your profession of faith. It’s not something you forget lightly.

But I like this description of the transitional point in the public ministries of Jesus for yet another reason. Baptism epitomizes the crucial understanding of the quintessential human condition. Baptism epitomizes the crucial understanding of what it means to be living as a human being on planet earth, the tensions of human potential for heights of transcendence in life and the depths of despair connecting the mud beneath our feet with the stars over our heads. Baptism is a sign in the possibility of connecting mud beneath our feet with the stars and the aspirations that are associated with the heavenly firmament high above our heads. Baptism represents balance, the best and the worst of what we might experience as human beings – beauty over and against the muck and mire of the world. It is about “stuckness” standing in tension with freedom and liberation and great potential. Baptism is a symbol of God’s hope for us and our place with God. Jesus’ baptism signals the possibility of looking up, raising our sights beyond the toil, and the trapping, and the pain, and the suffering – even beyond injustice and human tragedy.

We do well to notice John's reluctance in this story. "I am not worthy," John said. John's caution reminds me that we, as followers of Jesus, are engaged in this holy work of heaven with unclean and uncertain tools. At this intersection, like Jesus, we are to take up the heavenly cause with our lives, our hands, our feet, our mouths, often impure hearts, and our cluttered minds. These seem like poor tools to build or at least live our way into a new heaven and a new earth. John's reticence to baptize Jesus speaks of the magnitude of the event and even more, perhaps, the magnitude of the One who is stepping into the waters of the Jordan River.

This is no sanguine little splashing from a bowl of sanitized water (I just had to say that!) This immersion of Jesus was and is entering into the muddy muck and mire of human travail. Somehow here Matthew describes the holiness of God condescending to the vicissitudes of our existence. Yes, I said vicissitudes. By that I mean, remember that ache and pain when you climbed out of bed this morning? Just maybe a pinch or two or a little hobble. Or what about the cheap shot, the little jabs that come from our colleagues or neighbors or maybe even closest friends? Worry about a loved one with difficult diagnoses, broken heart, deep disappointment, that random shooting in Florida, or the murky politics in Washington and all around the country. The vicissitudes of our existence.

In this light John was right to be worried about the right order of things. But, it turned out better than expected! It is John's awareness that prompts his statement, "I am not worthy."

In the midst of the rough prophet's preaching out there in the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey, calling down fire and brimstone, talking about broods of vipers, and the heavens breaking out, and words of judgment and accusation and consequences. Something very different came in response from the heavens. The word we are given is "beloved." With the visual sign of the dove come the words, "My Beloved." When Jesus had been baptized and the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove, a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." "Beloved." What a beautiful word. To be loved is to be adored. To be beloved is to be cherished and treasured. And what better than this love directly from God?

If and when we are baptized into that same One here named "Beloved," we, too, are given the same standing in the sight of God. The experience of baptism and in the tradition of many mainline Christian churches traditions of baptism and confirmation, whether infant or believer, we are lifted into a new standing in the eyes of God and thus also in the eyes of this world. Perhaps most importantly, in the self understanding as a follower of Jesus.

Beloved, we are called, not just invited, but **called** to stand in the world as God's beloved! To invite others to take that same status and that same sense of belonging and privilege. In baptism we work the connections between the mud under our feet and the stars over our heads.

Debra Samuelson said, "This is the promise in our baptism. It is first an act of God – God claiming us as God's very own – a *beloved* child – and then God declaring to us – *simply because we belong to God* – that God is well pleased with us."

Now that is a story to tell again and again, one that is so greatly needed today – that I am beloved of God and that God is pleased with me – to take that in deeply. We work awfully hard to believe that we are loved and feel that we are loved again and again in questionable ways. We are drawn into scenarios of life where winning is everything about your worth. Your intrinsic worth is nonexistent unless you are a winner. (You know that damning word that you don't even have to speak. I even heard that once from a presidential candidate.) (sign of the “L” over the forehead...) We are drawn into scenarios where our life is evaluated by the ability to win. We even go to the extent that now we want to give every participant in any contest a trophy to reinforce the message that you are indeed a winner and thus important. And that's backwards by the way. Peer pressure, seeking release and peace in yoga or meditation or in our over compensation with food or drink and we struggle and search for acceptance as a modest approximation of being loved and capable of loving, often ineffective and not very convincing.

We need to celebrate life as beloved more, and more, and more. Because that is not always the story we tell ourselves, is it? Most of us have another story that runs in our head. Sometimes something we learned very early on or in the growing up years sometimes we call this story teller the inner critic, that one who reminds us just what a failure we are, or how people may only be pretending to like us, but if they really knew us they would run away and hide. Or how we are not attractive enough, or not talented enough, or not clever enough, or not intelligent enough to be loved, much less have someone be pleased with us.

Life can hold with it joy and laughter and wonderful conversations in friendships, some close enough to be our chosen family. And right alongside it, life can bring with it loss, and disappointment, and sleepless nights, and an inner certainty that no matter what we do or no matter how hard we try, we're just not measuring up.

To be baptized, a practicing follower of God's love in Jesus Christ is to accept that you are accepted, loved by God. God's love for you is so strong, so great, so lasting (we dare even say eternally lasting) that nothing can take that away. Though this world may swirl, and stagger and crashing, and judgment may rain upon us from time to time, this beloved status will never change. Who you are counts – beloved. And what you do counts . . . For you and I are part of God's presence in this world which is why we need to tell the story of baptism over and over again, to counter the story of the inner critic, to counter the story of the world often tells us; that is, to be truly beloved you have to possess something – money, house, goods, power. The list goes on. And once you've attained one thing, you see there's just one more thing you need before you really qualify.

So we tell this baptism story over and over to counter the story that you don't measure up, that you don't belong. And we celebrate the fact that, indeed, because of God's love you do measure up and you do belong. You have the potential to be that connection between the mud under our feet and the stars over our heads. The story of baptism is not only a story that we belong to God and that we are beloved by God, it is a story that we belong to each other, that we are part of a larger story of God's presence in the world.

So, from this moment on, I want to remind you that you are beloved, that God has loved you deeply, profoundly, with purpose. And that that love might spread through you and that

understanding and acceptance of others striving for justice in the world seeking to respect and honor those we meet along the way. Beloved. Beloved. May God bless you. Amen.

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Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Matthew 3:13-17
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