

**Sermon – “Remember Who You Are” – Matthew 3:13-17**  
**January 13, 2008**  
**The Baptism of the Lord Sunday**

We are now in those Sundays following Christmas where we enter the ever widening circles of discovery about who Jesus was as he walked this earth. As we journey with him, it is also a time for us to discover how the stories of this ancient life touch our lives.

One such story is the baptism of Jesus. Each gospel tells it a little differently. Matthew is clear to set John the Baptist as the forerunner preparing the way for Jesus and then when Jesus arrives at the shores of the Jordan to be baptized, John is taken back. For you see, for John, baptism was about repentance and forgiveness, and he believed that Jesus had no need for either.

Here’s where the shift comes – For Jesus, and the centuries of the Christian Church that followed, baptism was about identity – remembering who we are and whose we are. That voice that surrounded Jesus that day: the voice that said “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

This is his moment of acceptance of who he was – the experience of the Spirit descending like a dove – anointing him for ministry and service – and the wonderful affirmation for all to hear – “This is my beloved Son - with whom I am well pleased and in whom I delight!

This is heady stuff! What a way to begin a new stage of one’s life. What a way to feel before setting out on a new course.

We all long for affirmation – we all long to be praised. We yearn to be held in value, as worthwhile, as people who can accomplish something of worth. How easily we fall right back into being children bringing home a good report card and longing to hear the words, “Well done, Liz”.

Each day the world attempts to tell us who we are and how we are to live. Depending on whom we listen to we are; physical beings who are to make ourselves sexually attractive; intellectual beings who are to accumulate knowledge; consumers who are to acquire material possessions; workers who are to produce; or pleasure seekers who are to gratify privatized needs. The list could go on. But who are we?

No only do we get all these messages about what we should be, we also tend to hang so much on the approval of others and mix that all up with affirmation of who we are. There’s an event that has haunted me since childhood. It’s really quite silly! My dad had “hired” me to wash and wax his car – when I finished, I called him out for his approval and he pointed out some areas I had missed. I was crushed. I’d worked hard for that approval and a few words were devastating enough that it is still a vivid moment some 50 years later. Who knows why that moment stands out. There were plenty of times that Dad told me how proud he was of me and gave his approval, and I’m sure plenty of other times that he was critical, but that day, everything hung on his approval.

We are a people who love to please. How tempting it is to ride on the waves of approval or to wallow in the troughs of disapproval and to evaluate ourselves on what we hear from those around us.

I want to take us back to that moment of affirmation that came with the baptism of Jesus. He didn’t come with a perfect report card or a finely waxed car. We have no record that he had done

anything remarkable or significant up to this moment. The whole story of Jesus' ministry begins with God's affirmation here at the Jordan. Even before he got through the big test of forty days in the wilderness and the temptations, before he had told one story and drawn the crowds around him, before he had healed a single person, there is affirmation "With you, I am well pleased".

God speaks those longed for words "This is my beloved. With him, I am well pleased, while Jesus is still drenched with the waters of baptism. This is his anchor through the days ahead when others will try to tempt him to conform to their image of messiah or will try to bring him down.

I hope you can hear this voice today and remember beloved children of God that you have already been sealed in affirmation. One of the images that stayed with me came out of the 2004 General Conference of the United Methodist Church. The theme of the conference was baptism. I was involved in the Reconciling Movement which has been working for the full inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the church and changing some of the prohibitive rules.

As we talked about this theme of baptism, one person talked about being "water-marked" – it is that indelible seal that can't be removed from a piece of quality stationary. It is sealed through – not just on the surface. That became our theme. For those who have been excluded from many areas of the church, our message was that "no one could take the affirmation of your baptism away. You are a precious child of God." That image has stayed with me. So, I say to you today, you are sealed in God's love by that indelible watermark of God and I hope that amazing reality can be the anchor throughout your life experiences.

I read a beautiful story that has been attributed to a Canadian pastor:

"Fayette was an African American woman struggling with mental illness and lupus, living on the streets of Detroit. She came to sit on the steps of the church one day, refusing to come in, just listening from the outside. It was hot and the door was open, and I guess she heard us singing. She kept coming... arriving late, and leaving early, and for weeks never coming in the door. Eventually, she did come in and she sat at the table of that Sunday School class and even joined a new members' class.

In class, the pastor talked about baptism and what it meant to be named by God. He told them that it was a holy moment, a moment when you could hear God saying, "you are a beloved and precious child of God, and beautiful to behold".

Fayette heard this and said, "Oh Yes" and from that day onwards would bring it up again and again. She eventually was baptized and as she came up out of the water, drew in a new breath, looked around and said, "And now I am... and everyone joined in, "You are a beloved and precious child of God and beautiful to behold"

Two months later, Fayette was beaten and taken to the hospital. When the pastor arrived, he could hardly recognize her face it was so badly bruised. But when he got to the door, she looked up and declared, "I am a beloved and precious child of God...", hesitated as she looked in the mirror, and then said ...and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow I'll be so beautiful it will take your breath away!

What is it that this affirmation frees up in us to live our lives to the fullest. When we are anchored in truly believing that God has blessed and affirmed who we are, just as we are, then we are able to experiment with discovering what God has in mind for us. There are times in our lives when

we feel just as battered as Fayette was that night in the emergency room. Can we rise up out of those negative moments?

Our baptism is a call. It's not just a feel good call of affirmation. It's a call to servanthood and partnership with God to bring the message that all of life is called blessed. As servants, as we deeply hear this affirmation for our lives, we then can begin to see other people through the same lens and are called to remind them of their preciousness in God's eyes.

Be anchored in the affirmation that you are the beloved child of God. It is the inheritance of your baptism. Once we start from that place and continue to believe that nothing and no one can take that identity away from us, then we are free to explore what God has in mind for our lives.

Parker Palmer, a life long Quaker education, has written a wonderful small book, called "Let your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation". In it he writes, "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent." He suggests we ask the question, "Is the life I'm living, the life that wants to live in me?"

The powerful call of our baptism is to live with the integrity of the life that God has given us, to and then, to shape each day of that life. As we value our lives as beloved and affirmed, we begin to manifest God's Spirit working through us and then we can then hear the call to value all life as beloved of God. Living into that reality will bless the world with a deep righteousness, pursuit of justice, and offer profound respect for all of God's creation.

You are the beloved children of God. Watermarked and spirit-born. Go out and live in joy, children of God.