

Wesley United Methodist Church  
January 8, 2017  
Who Are You?  
Text: Isaiah 42:1-9  
Matthew 3:13-17  
Title: Connect with your Belovedness

If you ever want to get a group of pastors talking and telling stories ask them to tell you about weddings or baptisms. Either topic will produce a variety of stories some of which are heartwarming and others that are somewhat disturbing. Each of us will have a story that we think tops the others.

Today is one of those stories that John would have told. He was out in the open preaching and pleading with people to prepare for God's kingdom, to repent of their sins, and to be baptized as a sign that they would live their lives differently. People were responding. And then .....

That's when the unexpected happened. That's when Jesus showed up. That's when Jesus came to John to be baptized and John suddenly didn't know what to do. John tried to stop him insisting that he, John, should be baptized by Jesus and not the other way around.

Jesus insisted saying that it was necessary in order to "fulfill all righteousness." That was enough to convince John and so John agreed. But what does it mean? What did Jesus mean when he asked to be baptized to "fulfill all righteousness"?

Essentially this means to "accomplish God's mission." Jesus saw his baptism as advancing God's work. By being baptized, Jesus may have been confessing sin on behalf of the whole nation just as some previous prophets have done, or as pastors or priests have been known to do when praying on behalf of a congregation. Jesus was also showing support for

what John was doing, emphasizing the need for people to repent, to turn away, from their sins.

All four Gospels have some encounter between Jesus and John the Baptizer as the first public appearance of Jesus ministry. This is where John announces who Jesus is and all four Gospels proclaim that at this point, the Spirit of God appeared, descended upon Jesus and the voice of God proclaimed that Jesus was God's beloved son.

One of the stories that pastors tell about baptism (whether legend or not) is the story of the parent calling and telling the pastor that they want to make a date to have the baby done. This is generally followed by some joking about whether they want the baby rare, medium rare, or well done. What it does represent, however, is a sense among some that a baptism is a big family event where everyone shows up and then disappears never to be seen again.

It may be that we, in the church, don't do a very good job of talking about what baptism really is and what it means. In this case, looking at Jesus' baptism is a good lesson for us. Jesus' baptism by John marks the beginning of his public ministry, not the end of it. Baptism should mark the public beginning of our Christian journey not the end of it. There is no end to our Christian journey – even our death is not the end, but rather a different way of being eternally with God.

In baptism, God makes the proclamation that we are God's beloved children. We are chosen and loved by God. We are God's always and forever. We are dearly loved by God. We are cherished and we should never forget that.

What does it mean to be loved by God? When someone loves us, I think we typically want to do things that respond to that love, that show our love in response, and that will deepen and strengthen that love.

One of the problems is that in so many cases human love has strings attached. There are too many who have experienced love as conditional – conditional upon doing the right thing, conditional about keeping the other person happy, conditional upon doing what the other person wants us to do. In those cases, failure to comply can mean withdrawal of love and in some cases it is an open threat, “If you aren’t a good girl, mommy, daddy, grandma, grandpa (whoever) won’t love you anymore.”

Friends, let me say that I do not believe that is love. I’m not sure what it is, but it isn’t love and it certainly isn’t unconditional love – the kind of love we have from God.

Some years ago, I had a conversation with a young child who asked, “Do you love me, or do you like me?” Thankfully, my immediate response was, “I love you AND I like you.” The child gave me a big smile and said, “Good” and then went running off again. I didn’t know where the question had come from but later learned that the parent was trying to help the child understand the difference between loving and liking. The parent assured the child that “I will always love you.” I may not always like what you are doing, and there may be times when I may not even like you, but I will always, always love you. Nothing you can do will ever change that.” I think that is an important distinction. It is unconditional love, but not sloppy love that allows anything and everything without consequences.

There are times when as parents, grandparents, friends, or even as bystanders when we may be called upon to challenge a behavior. There are times when we may need to take disciplinary action to correct an

action, to allow consequences to take place, but that does not mean a rejection of that person.

We started worship today with the question, “Can you imagine what relationships could be like without the human fear of rejection?” We began with the invitation to “connect with your belovedness”. God has called every single one of us “beloved”. Each of us is cherished and loved by God and there is nothing we can do to change that. There are, however, many things we can do in response to that love.

The first is simply to believe and to embrace that love. For some that is easier than for others. Those who have not often experienced unconditional love from others can find it hard to believe it from God.

The song we just sang identifies some of the ways that God’s love reaches out to us and embraces us. “I am hope for all who are hopeless ... I am strength for all the despairing, healing for the ones who dwell in shame, I am the Word that leads all to freedom, I am the peace the world cannot give. I will call your name, embracing all your pain, stand up, now walk, and live!”

Through the years, I have had many encounters with people who were abused as children. Often, they find it almost impossible to believe that if a parent or whoever the abuser was, did not love them then surely God could not possibly love them.

Many people, even without any particularly traumatic event to point to, may know in their heads that God loves them, but find it hard to let that love move from their head to their heart. Whatever it takes, I encourage you to connect with your belovedness – connect with knowing that God really does love you with an unending, unconditional love that reaches into every ounce of your being.

Even if we have not been able to truly embrace that love, we can be intentional about extending that love to others. When we believe that God loves and cherishes us, simply because God created us, then we must also accept that God also loves and cherishes those with whom we live. But it goes beyond that. God also loves and cherishes those we meet throughout the day as well as those whom we go out of our way to avoid. God loves even those whom we do not like, and even those whom we may find it impossible to love.

When we live into the grace and acceptance that God has shown to us, then we are called to extend that grace, acceptance and love to others. Sometimes that may be really hard to do. It might mean identifying and challenging our assumptions about who people are and why they do something. Typically, we do not have the whole story. We may make assumptions about why someone acts in a certain way, but that's all we have is our assumptions.

Sometimes It can be risky to ask someone about their behavior, and to do so in a way that truly shows that we want to understand, rather than that we are trying to judge or criticize. It may be that the person will be able to respond in a way that opens the door for better understanding. It may also be that the person, for their own reasons, will not be able to hear our question as anything other than criticism. Sometimes it may be important for us to try to find out and understand but at other times we can just choose to believe that there may be reasons other than those that come to our mind immediately.

I am reasonably sure of one thing. If we can choose to believe that there are reasons other than the person was being rude, inconsiderate,

critical, or trying to intentionally hurt us, we will suffer far less by not taking into ourselves whatever motivation we have assumed. We may also discover that we start treating the other person differently and that may have the domino effect of that person also changing behavior.

Rob Bell notes that “believing in God is important but what about God believing in us?” What if we believe that we can actually be the kind of people we were meant to be? We can be “people of love, compassion, peace, forgiveness and hope. People who try to do the right thing all of the time.” We can be people who “act on the endless opportunities around us every day for good, beauty, and truth.” Imagine what it would be like if we understood the “faith that God has in all of us” to be the people that God calls us to be.<sup>i</sup>

Last week, I invited us to follow our star. As we do that, I invite us to connect with our belovedness and share that grace and acceptance with others.

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<sup>i</sup> From Worship Design Studio subscription – citation from “Dust” from the NOOMA Collection.