

## The Voice of Belonging

*Luke 3:15-17, 21-22*

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire...

...Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

There was a family who framed their children's baptismal certificates, hanging them in each child's bedroom. Every year on the anniversary of the date they were baptized they would celebrate reminding their child, "This is the day you became part of the family of God." Today we remember we are part of God's family. Today we remember the words, "You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." Today we sit under the affirming voice together reminded that we are not our own. We belong to God.

If we are honest, we need the reminder. Baptism is not something we think about every day. We are too busy; pulled in too many different directions. For some, hearing we are beloved is not something we are used to. You may have heard the story of a little girl who went to school long ago, during the time when the teachers would give hearing tests to the children. This little girl was not only born with a cleft palate but was also deaf in one ear. Every day, the children would tell her she was different looking, pointing out her scarred upper lip and crooked nose. So when it came time for the hearing test, the little girl did not want the other children to know she was also deaf in one ear. How the test was done, some of you might remember, was you were to put one hand over one of your ears as the teacher would whisper a phrase into your other ear. If you could repeat the phrase you would pass the test. So the little girl formulated a plan: she realized that if she didn't press firmly on her good ear, she could still hear what was said in the other. Usually the teacher would say something like, "The sky is blue," or "Your shoes need to be tied." But instead, the teacher leaned over and whispered these seven words that would change this child's life. She said, "I wish you were my little girl." It's God's voice breaking through the self-doubt, telling her how wanted she truly is. God offers us the same seven words today: "You are my child; I love you."

Of course, our baptism has another reminder too. It isn't just about the relationship between us and God, but also between us and each other. I belong to you. You belong to me. It's what it means to live in community. It is why during a baptism we put parents and children in the center of room—so they know they are surrounded. It's why we have them look around at our smiling faces when we say our vows: that we will help the parent to raise the child in the faith, pray for them and nurture them. It is why when a new member joins the church, whenever they reaffirm their faith, we affirm them by promising to infuse them into our community life—getting to know them and their needs. We are responsible for each other. Listen, we live in an

individualized, lonely society where we are made to think we are on our own to create our own life, as if we are downloading another app on our iPhone. Even in churches there is the 80/20 rule—where 80% of the work gets done by 20% of the people. Even in church, there is a disconnect that we need each other. But if the pastor could do everything on her own, what is the point of having leaders? If leaders could do everything on their own, what is the point of having a congregation? If congregation could manage everything on their own, what is the point of needing God?

If we continue to keep reading past Jesus' baptism, we notice in the same breath Luke leads us into Jesus' genealogy. We might think Luke is describing Jesus' family tree, like Ancestor.com, to authenticate who Jesus is, but it isn't a literal genealogy. Count the list and there are seventy-seven names—some of them we have never heard before. The number is significant. Seven is the biblical number for God's perfect completion. You see, Jesus first hears God's voice telling him he belongs to God and then in the same breath we see how Jesus is connected to the community of God—through David, to Abraham, all the way back to Adam where humanity begins. In baptism, we belong to God and we belong to one another. Not only do I belong to you, but you belong to me.

So if it is true—that we are all connected—it reshapes our understand of who is in our family. Read a story about a pastor who took vacation time to journey with the caravan of migrants traveling to the border. For two days, he crossed the Tijuana River with them to avoid the tear gas. He saw the young caring for the old and the old sharing canteens of water with the young. He said “I expected to hear stories of...violence. I did not expect to be on top of an 18-wheeler and have a stranger wrap her legs around me for hours to make sure I didn't fall off. They became family.” You see, one of the problems with our current President is he categorizes people into winners and losers. If you're Muslim, you lose. If you're brown seeking asylum, you lose. If you're poor, you lose. But not according to God's family! We have been baptized into a new way of thinking that challenges us to consider who really is in and who is out; who is a stranger and who is family.

We need the reminder: “You are my beloved child.” No one goes through the waters of life alone. Not even Jesus. In baptism, we are not our own. We belong to God. We belong to each other.