

“A Pleasing Message”
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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January 8, 2022

There are many times as a preacher when my reflection on Scripture or what I want to say to you is best told in the form of a story from the news or our community or even my own life. In those times images and stories carry a metaphor to help us connect to the scripture or more easily find meaning for our lives. But there are sometimes when stories don't quite work and metaphor just ends up watering down what I want to say. This morning is a sometimes morning.

There are a lot of things I believe—a lot of parts that make up Christianity and my personal spirituality. There are a lot of ways to enter into our shared faith or ways to enter into discipleship, but I have one belief that is at the center of my life and my ministry, and from which everything else radiates. That belief is that you are loved. We are each loved. Even I am loved. If you never hear me say anything else, if you never believe another word I say, I hope you hear that you are loved.

The center of my Christian faith is love, a love that comes from God to each one of us, a love that has the power to shape the world and transform every relationship we have. This love holds all the other elements of my life and my faith together. It's also one of the hardest beliefs to really embody.

The scripture passage we read from Luke, the baptism of Jesus, is the start of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus' ministry does not begin with miracles or healings or great crowds. There are not even any disciples to be found yet. It starts with a baptism where God proclaims in public for all to hear, “You are my Son, whom I dearly love, with you I am well pleased.”

This beginning sets the stage for what it means to be loved by God. The infant Christmas nativity story is an important one, but when you compare it to Jesus' baptism, I often think that God's love seems a little more fierce in this baptismal beginning. When we think of Jesus being born as a baby, it isn't so hard to understand that God would want to nurture and comfort and love this tiny little creature, to help him grow up into compassionate, caring man. For anyone who has ever looked eyes with an infant or had their finger grasped by five tiny little fingers, the love we see in the nativity story is an easy love. It's an understandable love.

But when baptism arrives Jesus is a grownup. And let's be honest, it's not as easy to fall instantly-head-over-heels in love with any grownup as it is an infant, even if it is Jesus. This story isn't about the hopes of a mother, or of the first moments of a new family or the strange but wondrous visitors, but it starts with wild man named John, down at a river, reminding people and yelling at everyone to repent because they are all sinners and have done things that need forgiving.

This is my kind of love! This story begins in a place of reminding us of all that we are—the good AND the bad—and proclaims love anyways. A kind of love that is unruly, that lays out the truth even when it is hard to hear, and, as we hear from the rest of the story, still results in love. When Jesus appears at the river with John, we see this love enacted in two ways. The most obvious way is when God says of Jesus, “You are my Son, whom I dearly love.” God marks the relationship with Jesus as one that will begin and be defined by love, contentment, and even joy. It is direct—it is a proclamation that can leave no doubt to God's intentions or the relationship between God and Jesus. It is one of love. It is one of a parent and a beloved child. The second way we see love enacted in through John, my favorite wilderness man. Besides just calling out other people for needing repentance and confession, John says of Jesus before he

arrives, “There is someone coming our way. There is someone who is great and powerful and important who is about to appear, and *I am not worthy to stoop down and loosen the strap of his sandals.*” John names his unworthiness, gets it right out there for everyone to understand. But, as we quickly learn about God and Jesus and their kind of love: it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that John doesn't think he is worthy of Jesus' company or companionship or that he doesn't think he is worthy to lead in comparison to Jesus and certainly not to minister to Jesus.

When it comes to love, John's unworthiness doesn't matter. Jesus comes anyway. Jesus is baptized, by John, anyway. Jesus is ministered and cared for by John, anyway. John says that he is not worthy. John admits that he is right alongside anyone who has ever needed to repent or to seek forgiveness for something they have done wrong in their life, and that doesn't stop love from coming to him. That doesn't stop Jesus from coming to him. That doesn't stop God from loving him.

This is such an amazing place to start Jesus' ministry, with this reminder that a need for forgiveness, a need for repentance, any need at all, will not separate someone from God's love. As we dive into the rest of Mark's gospel, as we try to interpret the stories of Jesus and disciples, whatever we know or whatever we learn, we remember that there was love, and that nothing can separate someone from that love. It's the most important thing, and it's the first thing. John says, “I am unworthy,” and still Jesus comes to him, still there is love.

We are a church that does a lot of loving—we demonstrate our love of our neighbors through our justice work, through our ministries of comfort and caring during hard moments in people's lives, we demonstrate it by showing up for one another and sharing our stories and listening to each other. I experience this church as overwhelmingly loving through our actions and deeds.

We are really good at loving others, but it is often easier for us to love others than it is to receive that love for ourselves. When I watch people be recipients of demonstrations or words of love, whether it is from neighbors or friends or even their own family, too often it is meant with protestations, hiding, and shying away from the whole thing. It's a lot easier for us to do the loving than it is to soak up the idea that we too are loved.

We get stuck in the place of unworthiness. We are too quick to leap to all the things we have done wrong, or could do better, or the ways in which we don't measure up to other people instead of remembering that when it comes to love, that is completely irrelevant. God's love is unconditional. God's love is 100% guaranteed, no matter what or no matter who you are. If we are ever in doubt of this, we just have to return to the river, return to the baptism of Jesus.

There are many reasons why people become baptized today or why parents choose to baptize their children, but I believe at the heart of it is this belief in sacred love. I believe that parents choosing baptism for their children want them to hear that same unconditional message that Jesus heard, "You are beloved. We are pleased with you" and to grow up feeling that same deep, abiding love from God. The baptism becomes the sign of the love that is within us and is given to us.

For adults or youth who choose baptism, there is more uncertainty. By the point you choose baptism you can probably make a whole list of reasons why you are secretly not the person everyone thinks you are and your doubts would fill a list twice as long as that—but there is still a *desire* for love. I think that as we age, we start to doubt our worthiness for love, and especially for God's love, but the desire to receive it is still there. In those instances, baptism allows the waters of love to wash over us, acting as a reassurance and a return to a time or

moment when you fully believed that you were loved. That you deserve love. That everyone deserves love, and that you are included in that everyone.

There is a folk song, a round that is sung around the campfire on warm summer nights that says “Love, love, love, the gospel in one word is love. Love your neighbor as yourself, love, love, love.” This baptismal beginning certainly preaches that same message.

I haven’t said anything today that you haven’t heard before, but we keep talking about it because it’s something we need to hear over and over again. Or maybe you don’t, but the person sitting next to you or across from you does. So, if you’re that person who needs to hear this message today, here it is, straight from the Gospel of Luke:

You are loved. Even if you can't feel it or don't think you deserve it. You are loved. Your worthiness is completely irrelevant, because no matter what, you are still loved. You are loved by God. Wholly, completely, wildly, just the way you are. And nothing can separate you from that love.