

Rev. Steve Clifton The Baptism of Jesus January 8, 2012 Text: Mark 1:4-11

He hasn't done anything yet. Before Jesus does anything in Mark's gospel Jesus is baptized and hears God say that he is "special... beloved, that God is pleased with him."

In the chapters that follow the one we read today, Jesus will do many amazing things. He will heal the sick, give sight to the blind, calm the raging sea, walk on water ... but here in the 1st chapter of Mark's gospel Jesus hasn't done anything yet.

Still - standing in the waters of the Jordan, Jesus hears words of absolute affirmation: You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.

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Maybe you have had the wonderful experience of hearing or receiving strong affirming words from a parent, a teacher, a spouse, a friend. Maybe you have heard someone call you their beloved, their special friend, the apple of their eye. .. Maybe you have longed to hear words like that: I love you or you are special to me. Such affirming words have real power.

I read a story of a father who used to say to his son every day: "You are a fine young man. "Someone asked what this boy had done to earn this daily dose of praise. The answer: I" tell him he is a fine young man at least once a day. Maybe if he hears that every day for 18 years, it should help to know that he really is a good and decent person. And he will live that way too."

Most often, I expect, if we hear affirming words spoken to us it's because we have done something special to earn them. Most often we say kind things to others, to our spouses, our friends, our children ... because of a task well done, a good-report-card, a fine musical performance, a promotion at work. But Jesus receives his divine affirmation

just as he begins his work. What's remarkable about the words that Jesus hears is that he receives such clear affirmation of how special he is and that he is loved and valued, before he can do anything that might make it seem that he earned the words he hears.

There is a great difference between being praised for just being who you are ... and being praised because of something that you have done. After Martin Luther King (MLK) Junior began his 1st pastorate in Montgomery Alabama his father wrote to him to tell him to be careful. "Everywhere I turn people are congratulating me for you ... you are becoming very popular ... so you must remain in prayer." King's father knew there was danger in being praised only for the things that we do well. We can soon come to see our worth solely in terms of our performance; we can come to value ourselves by the reaction of others to what we do. We can become anxious and fearful about how others react to us, because all that we are is wrapped up in our performance and its evaluation. You can get into trouble if the only affirmation that comes to you is for what you have done. So the Senior Rev. King says to his son "stay in prayer." Stay close to God and know that your value is not just in what you do.

It's true that in our world we tend to value people not for being who they are but for what they can do...not for their intrinsic value but for producing, accomplishing .We admire the rich, the educated, the articulate, the, talented. And sometimes we denigrate those who cannot produce - the handicapped, the ill, the elderly, the poor... Sometimes people who fall in those so called" "unproductive" categories learn to undervalue themselves.

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I remember a rather poignant letter to the editor, penned by an elderly woman who wrote on the issue of euthanasia. She wrote: "I am in favour of euthanasia. As I grow old I do not want to be a burden to my family. I don't want to use up their inheritance in taking care of me." Somewhere along the way this woman had come to see her own life as of little value. In her own eyes she became just an inheritance, valuable only for the money she could leave behind.

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At Jesus beginning, at his baptism, before he had done anything, accomplished anything, Jesus value was affirmed. God said: "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased."

So... at our beginning, at our baptism, in faith, and on each step of the journey we too are affirmed.

Before we can do anything, even when we can accomplish nothing, God loves us for who we are. From the beginning the One who gives us life calls us beloved children, and we are the apple of God's eye.

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I was baptized on May 13, 1962 at Westway United Church in Etobicoke, Ontario. The presiding minister was the Rev. Victor Wood .I met Victor Wood few years ago. He didn't remember me. And I didn't remember him either. I don't remember anything about my baptism. And if you, like me, were baptized as a baby, you probably don't remember much about your baptism either. ..

But we can remember Jesus baptism; it's the model for our own. As it was for Jesus so at our baptism God declared his great love for us....At the very beginning of our Christian journey, before we could do anything to earn God's love, God claimed us as God's beloved.

And if we can receive that love, hear that affirmation, know deep down as Jesus did that we are special to God, just for being who we are ... maybe we can be freed from anxiety and fear about performance and earning our worth, be freed to love and live as followers of Jesus. And ...if we miss the words spoken at the beginning, Jesus shares more words as the story goes on, tells us of a God who loves without limit, who pours grace out even on those who do not feel deserving. To those words Jesus adds action: speaking to the outcast; reaching out to the discarded and broken; including those who have been pushed to the margins, because he knows that they are loved.

Rodger Nishioka, a scholar who studies young adults, people under 30, says that one of the characteristics of people in this age group is that they see their value in terms of their accomplishment. How they are evaluated and self evaluated is related to how they are seen to succeed. So, some may have a greater generational challenge as they hear that they are valuable, worthy and loved and that they do not have to earn it.

Jesus ministry begins with these affirming words: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." Maybe this beginning is part of what made Jesus so special. In his ministry Jesus endured rejection and opposition and trouble; he was able to be faithful and loving and giving through it all, maybe because he knew God's love for him was unconditional and unearned and unshakable.

So may it be for you and me.