

Sunday, January 13, 2018

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

God Is FOR You

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

INTRODUCTION:

All four Gospel writers, record the beginning of Jesus' public ministry with the appearance of John the Baptist. In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist is portrayed as the last and the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, a transitional figure forming a bridge between the age of promise and the age of fulfillment. John is the forerunner of the Messiah predicted.

The crowds of people who came to hear John were primarily ordinary people – many of whom were quite poor. John tells them that they must show generosity to one another in their needs—a so-called 'work of love' that went beyond the minimal requirements of the law. Tax collectors and soldiers (who policed the country) were to act honestly and justly. John did not advocate a radical social upheaval, but insisted on moral principles that would lead to the transformation of society from ***within*** rather than by violent revolution.

In this passage, when Jesus is baptized, the clouds part and a voice from heaven is heard. The opening of heaven is a common image in apocalyptic literature, often associated with the giving of revelation. This is the divine confirmation that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God. Also, the Spirit of God descends on Jesus in the form of a dove signifying his "anointing" as Messiah and his empowerment to accomplish the task God has set out for him. Doves had various symbolic functions in ancient sources; perhaps the most widespread and relevant for Jewish hearers would be the dove's role as a harbinger of a new world. Jesus was about to usher in this new world and his message would reshape our understanding of God.

Hear this reading from the Gospel of Luke - Chapter 3.

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**SCRIPTURE:**

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all,

“I baptize you with water.

But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the *Holy Spirit* and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.

And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove.

And a voice came from heaven:

“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

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I'll never forget the night that I was awarded my Eagle Scout award. My father held both of my shoulders, looked me square in the eye and said, “I'm so proud of you!” And also, that magic moment when my daughter was flying across the country to begin her first semester in college. Her mother, tearfully hugged young Nicole at the airport gate and I overheard her whisper, “I love you more than anything else.” Not everyone is blessed to receive such affection but its what parents are *supposed* to say! So, when we read that the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove and God's voice was heard from heaven, saying, “*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased*” it's a big moment but no big surprise. Of course you love your son! He's literally a chip off the old block! Yet I think there is something very surprising going on at this baptism. There is more than a simple outpouring of familial affection going on here. If we dive in a bit deeper, I think this story may have deep and lasting impact on all of us. But first, let us pray...

God of great surprises and ever unfolding revelation, let us follow you into the deep waters of baptism, so when the storms of life sweep across the stillness, when turmoil disturbs our peace, when conflict muddies our vision, we will remember our baptism. Let us dive deep, so that in the midst of such confusion, we will still hear clearly that whisper in our own heart . . . "You are mine; I love you! With you I am well pleased" AMEN

Psychologists will tell you that, deep down, we are all desperately seeking the approval of others, especially those closest to us and mostly the approval of our parents. And, for those raised in religious families it is easy to equate parental approval as the definitive formula for God's approval. Religious or

not, approval seeking behavior can be like a drug that we chase to validate our very existence. As the addiction for approval intensifies we will even betray our own beliefs, opinions and needs because we will value the approval of others above our own sense of self. Someone else's opinion of who we are and how we behave becomes far more important than our own view. Consequently, disapproval becomes unbearable. Naturally it is disturbing to be rejected and, to a certain degree, there is undeniably a deep satisfaction when we are accepted. But, in extreme situations, approval seeking behavior can paralyze us from making any decision on our own or taking any action apart from somebody else's support.

In my former career in the L.A. film industry, getting the attention of others - especially those who were in power - was the whole game. To feel good about your work depended entirely on others to approve - executives, critics, fans, friends - all had sway over your perception of self-worth. It drove me and many of my friends to insane behaviors, compromised values and disingenuous, often abusive relationships. What I began to notice, especially with a good many celebrities I knew, was that there is no point of notoriety or success where you finally locate genuine happiness through the approval of others. True happiness can only come from being yourself, whether or not anyone even notices. Living solely for another's approval is a self-deprecating, unmanageable façade.

To live honestly and courageously be your unique, differentiated self, is the path to authentic success and true happiness. Make no mistake about this, God created everyone of us as an original, never-to-be-repeated, distinctive jewel that has eternal significance. Yet, our fear of disapproval is a powerful influence on the way we behave. Our need for approval was fashioned very early on in our development and is deeply engrained in most of us. For many people of faith, we extend our fear of disapproval to the way God sees us.

I was raised in a faith tradition that seemed to portray God as stern mathematical, transactional God. I was taught that all my "good deeds" were weighted carefully against my bad. I grew up with an image of God holding a scale in front of me and always found me wanting. The God I eventually rejected was a distant, hard judge who needed to be feared more than loved.

The God I eventually came to know was revealed to me not through religion but in the Gospel accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the Gospels I read how Jesus spoke of a God who always affirms our innate goodness even while tenderly understanding our weakness, self-doubt and lame attempts to disguise our frailty. It was a stunning revelation!

Baptism is the sacramental, symbolic act that we proclaim to affirm the reality of this God who can only love us. You and I are pre-approved and thoroughly acceptable in God's eyes - every moment of every day, just as we are - **not** as we *should* be or what we *think* others think we should be. Scripture clearly teaches us that there is nothing I can do or not do that will separate me from God's love or increase God's approval of me. Even my sin is not a problem for God, it's more a problem for me! If there is any good news in this Gospel, that is it. No matter what you are going through; addictions, family problems, depression, anxiety disorder, career failures, financial reversals, health concerns or even worse, the God who loved Jesus out of the waters of baptism also loves you in exactly the same way! This is the God who will never abandon you. This is the God who is always for you and absolutely everything you go through will be used by God to redeem you, heal you and restore you to wholeness. Now that's good news!

Can you possibly trust in this kind of God? Can you find the courage to accept that you are already accepted without pretense, disguise or accomplishment? This is the baptismal message and promise for all of us. This is why we practice baptism. In these waters we proclaim that God is eternally for us. In these waters of baptism God proudly declares, "You are mine, whom I love, with you I am well pleased."

This week, imagine, every day, that God is for you. Even if you don't believe it, act as if you do. Think, each day, I am unreservedly accepted, approved and infinitely loved - there are no approval seeking behaviors left to engage in. I am free to simply be me. When you make mistakes, (which you will) when you fail and fall short of the ideal you, (which you will) it's all right! Start again, and repeat this short scripture from Song of Songs, "I am my beloveds, and her/his desire is for me."¹ (repeat)

In a few minutes, on our way out of worship, we are going to offer you an invitation to reaffirm your baptism - to remember the external sign of your acceptance as God's beloved, just the way you are. I don't know how Jesus felt when he came up from the waters of the Jordan and saw the Spirit descending like a dove. I wonder if he even needed to hear that voice of heavenly approval. But I do know that I need to be reminded that God actually takes pleasure simply in my very existence and when we together remember and reaffirm our baptism, we are all well pleased. **This is the unmistakable good news of the Gospel, God is forever and always FOR you! AMEN.**

¹ Song of Songs 7:10