

The Beloved
Matthew 3:13-17

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“This is my son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased.” We read the story of Jesus’ baptism in the season of Epiphany because of this revelation, this unveiling, of who Jesus is. God’s son. The Beloved. I wonder what it was like to be John that day. He has been calling everyone with much urgency to change their ways and be baptized for the One is here and has brought the kingdom of heaven near. People wonder if John himself was the One, but he assures them, “No, the One is so spectacular, I am not worthy even to carry his sandals.” And then one day the One approaches him and doesn’t just ask him to carry his sandals; he asks John to baptize him. At least carrying someone’s sandals is something a servant, or person of lesser status, would do. But to baptize someone is to acknowledge that they have need of repentance and you are worthy of assuring them forgiveness. No wonder John protests when Jesus asks to be baptized by him.

“This is my son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased.” And I wonder what it was like to be in the crowd that day gathered around the River Jordon and witness Jesus’ baptism. Does he break away from the throng singularly or is he just the next one in line? Can they see the epiphany in John’s eyes when Jesus approaches him? Do they think, “This guy? He’s just as dirty and sweaty as the rest of us! His clothes are just as shabby as ours! This is God’s son? He’s just like us!” Perhaps one of the epiphanies of this day is not just who Jesus is – God’s son – but who God’s son is – one of us. Dr. Matthew Meyer-Bolton writes that Jesus’ baptism is “an expression of the astonishing humility and solidarity of the Incarnation.” And perhaps another epiphany is not just that God’s beloved is one in the crowd, but that each person in the crowd is God’s beloved. Each one of us is God’s beloved.

Of course, love is a central part of our Christian faith. Later on in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus sums up the message based in the books of Moses and later prophets: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But I have an issue with this summary. I don’t think it’s complete. There is an essential middle commandment implied but not explicitly stated. If we do not have love and respect for all that God has created and called good, are we really loving God with all our hearts, and with all our souls, and with all our minds? If we do not have respect and love for ourselves as part of God’s good creation, does loving our neighbors as ourselves have any meaning? Recognizing ourselves as God’s beloved is essential to walking Jesus’ way, to loving God and loving our neighbors. That unspoken middle commandment could be “Love yourself as God loves you.”

How many of us know someone who will give you the shirt off their back, but will refuse to accept help for themselves? How many of us relate to that person? It is not easy to accept help, especially in a society that reveres individualism, that tells us we should pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. But I'm a firm believer – though not a perfect practitioner – that accepting help makes me even better at helping others, that loving myself helps me to even better love others.

A few years ago, I was at a gas station in a nearby town when I saw a young man wandering up to customers outside the store and asking a question. I saw each customer shake their head and the young man turn around and look around for someone new. I had seen this person doing the same thing in another nearby town. His expression and demeanor indicated that he may be struggling with addiction. But I did once give him a ride to his home, a decrepit place that spoke volumes about where he was in life and all that he was lacking.

Inside the gas station, as I was choosing a beverage from the cooler, he approached me and asked for money. I said I had no cash but that sometime he should stop by the church that I was associated with at the time to see if we could help. He nodded and walked back outside. When I went to pay for my drink, the cashier, an older man, said with frustration, "He needs to stop harassing customers and get out of here." Not totally sure how to respond, I said, "Yeah, he's definitely dealing with some stuff." The cashier replied, somewhat angrily now, "Yeah, well, I was dealing with that stuff once too and no one helped *me*. I got *myself* out of it." I nodded, paid for my drink, and left. I don't know if it would have made a difference, but I wonder now if it would have eventually sunk in if I had said to the cashier what I was thinking, "Someone should have helped you too. You were worthy of that love too." The cashier was showing the young man the same love and compassion that he extended to himself. My heart broke for him.

We are used to repenting when we recognize that we haven't always loved others the way we should, that we haven't always recognized the belovedness in our neighbors. Do we repent when we haven't loved ourselves the way we should? When we haven't recognized ourselves as the beloved with whom God is well pleased? I appreciate the writing of Henri Nouwen because he was a Christian who struggled with depression, with self-love. He strove, not always successfully but always persistently, to identify as a beloved child of God. In his book Life of the Beloved he wrote, "When we claim and constantly reclaim the truth of being the chosen ones, we soon discover within ourselves a deep desire to reveal to others their own chosenness. Instead of making us feel that we are better, more precious or valuable than others, our awareness of being chosen opens our eyes to the chosenness of others. That is the great joy of being chosen: the discovery that others are chosen as well."

John does not believe he is worthy even to carry Jesus' sandals, but he learns he is worthy of so much more. He is worthy of baptizing the son of God, the beloved. And Jesus humbles himself to accept John's gift, to stand in solidarity with the people gathered on the

riverbank. Again, Dr. Matthew Meyer-Bolton reflects on Jesus' baptism and the way that it reveals to us. He writes that it is "The way of companionship. The way of accompaniment. In a word, the way of "with": God with us, and us with God and neighbor. Jesus' gift is not just handing out charity from above. It is being in relationship with us, being one of us, receiving from us. Jesus reveals his way of reciprocity and solidarity by baptizing us all with the Holy Spirit and accepting John's baptizing at the River Jordon, by feeding the 5,000 and accepting meals throughout his ministry, by washing his disciples' feet and letting Mary wash his own with expensive perfume. No, there is nothing we can offer to reciprocate Jesus' ultimate gift of love. But perhaps part of the lesson is graciously receiving that gift, claiming our chosenness, seeing ourselves as part of God's good creation. Accepting that we are created out of love, to give love, to be loved. That each one of us is God's beloved.