

“BELOVED STILL”
Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17
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“This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” These might be my favorite words in the Bible. After Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist, these words echo from the heavens. I cannot help but see these as the hopeful and loving words of a parent. In this case, the statement marks Jesus as the son of God; but these are words that could be spoken by any parent to any child in a moment of pride and celebration. These are words of love and adoration, words that celebrate the connectedness of parents and children. And as we imagine what the baptism of Jesus must have been like—as we have witnessed Sandy’s baptism this day, as we remember or celebrate our own baptism, as we mark the baptism of Jesus—these words celebrate the adoration and pride that God has for each of us.

I was baptized on Easter Sunday in 1981, along with two other youth from the Disciples of Christ church where I grew up. Together, we had taken the membership classes offered by our pastor, Gail Davis. I remember learning about the history of our denomination, the history of our own church; and I remember reading this text from Matthew as we talked about the logistics of our baptisms: bringing the towel over our face as Gail bent us backward and under the water; remembering to keep our feet planted on the floor of the baptismal pool—so we would look like we were being easily lifted out of the water rather than looking like thrashing bodies. I remember my baptism very clearly, as if my hair were still wet from the experience; and I remember Gail Davis looking into my dripping face, saying: “This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.” I was the third person baptized that day, and those words had been spoken previously to Wendy and Mason; but in that very wet moment, those words were coming from Gail, my parents, and from God. That is why I love the ritual of baptism and have a special fondness for “believer baptism,” that is, the baptism of youth and adults who have made a choice to mark their commitment to their growing faith. There is something special about the interaction between God and all people when they are baptized; and for people who are old enough to experience that interaction, it is special.

Baptism is celebrated in many ways and for many reasons. Infants, youth, and adults can be baptized. Baptisms can occur by full immersion, by sprinkling, or even simply in the washing of the hands. Baptisms can occur in filled churches on Sunday morning, in intimate gatherings of friends and family, in hospital rooms, on the shores of a river, or in the blue waters of the tropics. Baptism marks many things for many communities: for some, baptism marks the entrance into the community; for others, it washes away sins; and for still others, it celebrates the connection between God and humanity and unifies the individual with the death and resurrection of Jesus. For some communities, baptism serves as a reminder of our responsibilities to serve one another with justice and mercy; for others, baptism marks the reception of the Holy Spirit; and for still others, baptism marks new life, either at the birth of a child or in a moment of re-commitment to faith. In most places, baptism does many, if not all, of these things; but in all baptisms, the one

being baptized and the community that gathers meets God, the sacred one, in the water.

My experience with baptism may be very different from your own. But at the heart of this sacrament is the fact that it unifies us through an experience that is shared not just by us but also by Jesus, the son of God, the one who walked on this earth and proclaimed the love of God to all. And so, no matter how or where baptism is celebrated, one thing remains central to this sacrament: it is a visible act of faith and celebration by an individual and a community. This sacrament marks the faith of one person and, today, has brought Sandy to seek membership in this congregation and to mark her commitment to faith through this ritual of water, community, and blessing. As we witnessed and participated in the baptism of Sandy Murphy, we participated in her continued journey of faith. In her baptism—and every baptism—we celebrate the gift of God’s grace, the gift of the Holy Spirit that moves and shapes us, and our connection to Jesus, the beloved child of God.

Now that we have talked about baptism in warm and fuzzy ways, and as your heads fill with memories of your own baptisms or the baptisms of your children or grandchildren, let us look seriously at our scripture lessons for today and realize that our shared baptism is not simply a glorious welcome to the party. While it is a welcome to God’s blessings, it is also a ritual of “call.” In the United Church of Christ we most often talk about “call” when we speak of the processing of hiring a pastor. The “call process” includes such mundane things as exchanging résumés, interviewing candidates, and negotiating financial compensation. It all sounds very business-like, doesn’t it? But what separates the “call process” from just another job search is the idea that through prayer and guidance from the Holy Spirit both the congregation and the candidates involved in the process will find clarity and guidance concerning their abilities and desire to enter into relationship with one another. From my side of the equation as a pastor seeking “call,” from serving on search committees, and from serving on church and ministry committees, the “call process” is filled with mystery and, often times, with obvious and subtle places of holy interaction.

That is how we most often hear about the “call process.” But I believe clergy don’t have a corner on being “called.” In fact, I believe being called is what baptism is most about. It is God’s call to minister to friends and loved ones and strangers alike, accepting the “call” to nurture one’s own faith and, most importantly, to accept and celebrate a “call” to live as Jesus did as a servant. In the scripture readings for today, this call to servanthood is ever so clear.

Our baptism is our moment of “call” into the family. It is the moment when God says to each of us, “This is my beloved child with whom I am well pleased.” But with those words come a challenge: because when Jesus was baptized it, too, was a moment of “call” into the family. In his baptism, Jesus was entering the family business, if you will. In our reading from Isaiah we, as Christians, can see the life and ministry of Jesus proclaimed in God’s words to the nation of Israel. As the nation of Israel is promoted and celebrated—as this new Moses, this new prophet who will bring justice comes—we see the future when a child shall grow into a man and that man will tell of “turning the other cheek, will tell of the blessings of the poor in spirit, the meek, and the mourners.” This is the one who will congregate not with the rich and powerful, but with tax

collectors, societal washouts, and with unattached women. Even in the days of the exile God was proclaiming a message of hope and justice and calling upon the people of God to take their place as servants of God. “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.”

In many ways, as Jesus emerges from the waters of the Jordan River, newly baptized by John the Baptist, Jesus himself is accepting his call as the son of God. He accepts that his lot in life is to be in the family business, not to be a farmer or seller of goods. The family business that Jesus is entering is that of the property holder for his father. In the tradition of the time, Jesus is accepting a transfer of property to the oldest son, to God’s son who is now left with the job of keeping up the business. And so, Jesus becomes the servant that God proclaimed to Israel in Isaiah. Jesus becomes the one who will teach and translate for God; Jesus becomes the caretaker of God’s property, the kingdom on earth. And as Jesus accepts his “call” from God, it is a doting parent who proclaims, “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.”

And Jesus is the son who, when trying to convince John the Baptist to baptize him says, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” These are the first words of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel; and they are words concerning righteousness, a major theme for Matthew and an interesting thing for Jesus to say, I think, who is to be servant of all. I don’t often include righteousness in the word description of our leaders. Somehow, in our time, being righteous is lost on too many of our leaders; it is lost in our culture and also in the time of Jesus. But Jesus’ words to John challenge the assumption that a leader—the one called—cannot be righteous and good. In his baptism, Jesus takes his place as a new leader who proclaims that servanthood is a blessed calling and that others should join with him in following God.

And so it is with us—beloved still—as we take part in the same ritual that Jesus used to accept his “call” to the family business. Beloved by God in our time and place, we are each welcomed into the family to take our place as servants and ministers; to share God’s vision of justice and mercy; to speak out when God’s words are used to divide rather than unite; to take our place as the next generation of beloved children of God. Whether we are eight months or eighty-eight years old, that is who we are, and God is well pleased with us, too. Amen.