

2020 01 12 – Beloved

Matthew 3:13-17

When Jesus decided to be baptized, he went to the Jordan River where his cousin John had been baptizing people from Jerusalem, Judea and the whole region around the river. But today's scripture reading tells us that "John tried to dissuade Jesus, saying, "I should be baptized by you, and yet you come to me!" John was convinced that he was not worthy of this honour. But, when Jesus insisted, John reluctantly agreed.

What is it that makes us worthy of important tasks? How do we know when we are worthy of another person's trust or regard? What is it about us that tells people who we are?

When I was in my thirties I was interested in the work of Dr. Scott Peck and I searched out a community-building group that was based on his theories. We met once a month and the process that we followed was that we sat in a circle in silence waiting for someone to be moved to speak. It was one of my first experiences with long periods of silent contemplation. When I had been attending the group for several months I realized that I had developed a deep connection to some of the other members and had been privy to some of their deepest thoughts, but, in reality, I knew very little about them. I didn't know where they lived, what they did for a living, what religion they followed, what education they had received, or even their last name. Certainly, in the eyes of the world, I had no idea who these people were, and yet, I knew them deeply.

So what information do we really need to know about someone, to have a sense of who they are, of their worth in the world? What are the essential characteristics that impact a person's identity? Well, if we believe all the messages in the media around us, the most important parts of our identity would be: our appearance, our job, our car, our house, our golf game, our latest vacation destination, the amount of money we gave to charity, the number of friends we have on Facebook or the number of people who follow us on Twitter.

Every advertisement we see on television or on social media is attempting to define for us who we should be and how we need to change our identity in order to increase our worth in the eyes of those around us. Recently I've even seen an advertisement that says they can tell you, just from your last name, whether or not you are descended from royalty. What is it that keeps us so fascinated with kings and queens, princes and princesses? Why do we even care where Meghan and Harry are going to spend their time? What makes them more worthy of our interest than the transient person who stopped in my office this week looking for financial aid?

The answer is nothing. There is no reason why they are more worthy. According to Henri Nouwen, priest, author, professor, and beloved pastor, the most important identity that we have is our spiritual identity. Henri Nouwen wrote:

Spiritual identity means
we are not what we do or
what people say about us.
And we are not what we have.
We are the beloved daughters and sons of God.

We are worthy, we are enough just the way we are, because we are loved. We are worthy and we are loved even if we don't believe it. We are the beloved children of a God that is the Essence of Love, the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being.

As soon as Jesus had been baptized by John, he had a vision of the Spirit of God descending as a dove hovering over him. Then a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Own, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests."

That is what love about baptisms. Every time someone is baptized, we are reminded of God's unconditional and everlasting love and forgiveness. Every time we see the water poured into the font and then droplets falling on a person's head, we are given a visual sign of God's invisible grace. Every time the cross is drawn on someone's forehead we remember again that we have been claimed by Christ and that each one of us is God's beloved child. That is our identity. It is the only identity that truly gives us worth.

Do we need to be baptized in order to have that identity? NO! We don't suddenly become more special in God's eyes just because someone dunked us in a river or dropped a little bit of water on our head. We don't suddenly have more worth in the universe because someone drew a cross on our foreheads. Baptism is not a magical event... it is a visible sign of an already existing invisible grace.

Baptism is, of course, a very spiritual event. It is a time when people have a strong sense of the spirit moving in and through them. Many, like Jesus, may even have a visual or auditory experience of the sacred as they are being baptized. That is the whole point, isn't it? We celebrate our sacraments, both baptism and communion, in order to experience more fully the presence of the Holy Mystery in our lives.

The last step in the act of baptism is the laying on of hands. In that step we pray that the Holy Spirit will be at work in that person and that may be "a faithful witness of Jesus Christ." Baptism is a sacrament in which we are called, claimed and commissioned: we are called God's own, welcomed as children of God: we are claimed by Christ, become a part of the Christian community and we are commissioned to a ministry of love, peace and justice. In our baptisms we are reminded that we are all worthy and capable of doing God's work in the world, that just as we are, we are enough.

Our identity, our worthiness is not based on what we do or what people say about us, or what we have. Our worthiness, like the worthiness of every other creature on this earth, is based only on the fact that we are part of creation, that we are the beloved children of God. That's the only identity that really matters, it's the only thing we need to know.