

With Whom I am well Pleased...

Menno Mennonite Church
January 12, 2020

Purpose: To embrace the deep truth of God's blessing

Message: Each of us, regardless of our origin, blessed and embraced by the good news of God's approval.

Scriptures: Matthew 3:13-17 (I will read); Isaiah 42:1-9 (secondary reading—to be read first)

Synopsis: We are often addicted to proving our own worth. We take pride in our ability to work, to deliver and make available our responsibilities in the world. As people of responsibility great and small, we take who we do as workers seriously. We are not that different when we think about our spiritual lives. Ours, occasionally, is a faith of list of that which we do and do not do. Sometimes, if we are honest, we come to understand our ability to fulfill that list and to adhere to rules as a measure of the blessing we have from God. Yet, like Christ in the moment of embracing his ministry, we are met with a God who says this first and foremost: you are beloved; you are welcomed, and with you I am pleased.

Matthew 3:13–17 (NRSV)

The Baptism of Jesus

(Mk 1:9–11; Lk 3:21–22; Jn 1:29–34)

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "**Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.**" Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ Then Jesus
came from Galilee
to the Jordan
to be baptized by John.

¹⁴ But John tried to deter him,
saying,

"I need to be baptized by you,
and do you come to me?"

¹⁵ Jesus replied, "Let it be so now;
it is proper for us to do this
to fulfill all righteousness."

Then John consented.

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized,
he went up out of the water.

At that moment heaven was opened,
and he saw the Spirit of God
descending like a dove
and settling on him.

¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said,

"This is my Son, whom I love;
with him I am well pleased."

It is important to know who does what. Every structure, every organization, every relationship has its list of roles and expectations. Spoken or written, explicit or simply the habits of decades of habit our structures are well intact. There is a job description to a greater or lesser degree spelling out who does what, when and to what degree. Often it is the most charged moment of any relationship—what are your expectations and whether those expectations are being met or not. If things are functioning well, fine—chances are we can get on with what ever we need to do going forward. But this is serious stuff, laying as it does at the intersection of expectation, power, responsibility, personality, and just needing to get things accomplished for the good of all. In our households, there is the core list; if I cook, perhaps the people who eat with me clean up. We have a notion by in large of who buys the groceries, who pays the bills and does the laundry. Most of the time it is this doing that bears our troubles. We don't tend to engage the stuff that bugs us, our feelings or our fears—that's not what drives our arguments, even if they happen to be at play. Instead, it is failures to DO things that often carry the freight for the bigger issues that lie underneath. When we fail to do or assume that someone will do something and does not—that's what we argue about. It may well be *about* something else, but we use the stuff we do to carry the rest of agenda. It is this structure that keeps things well oiled and makes all the difference.

Our spiritual lives function in a fairly similar way. We often approach our relationship with the holy with yet another list of tasks which are ours to do. We are here, God is there, and never the tween shall meet. Discipleship means doing stuff after all. We need to pray, sing, worship, read the bible, participate in committees, do good works, and generally keep our nose clean for our spiritual selves to be in good order, often creating a list of things we should and ought to do that can be as demanding as any other list of should we happen to carry. We Anabaptists are especially insistent about this because we so closely associate what one does with what one is as a matter of character. We want to be doers of the word. When we fail these myriad tasks, we can often end up feeling as though we have some dropped the ball and in our minds we might have God clucking a tongue while looking at a celestial chore chart. We have our jobs; our duties. We need to hold up our end of the bargain, tending our responsibilities in the here and now, and God stay over there—loving sure, but usually a love that is predicated on how well we check off the list we have in our heads.

Because that is how humanity has always related to the divine. You have a god out there set up to look after things—the crops, fertility, love, success, what have you. The work of the mortal is to do the things that keep the god happy, throwing in some special favors in order to get special favors. Never mind that our theology says that the world doesn't work this way, many times we behave in exactly this way within our relationship with the God of the universe. God, we hold, is creator and CEO and has the responsibilities to keep things under control and we have the job of worshiping and sweating it out here on the factory floor. We know that when it comes to the incarnation, the organizational flow chart was turned on its head, once and for all. God comes and is with us, and crosses the boundaries, and enters into our world fully and completely. God comes and is present in the mud with us, working with us, along side us and is present to us and that has a way of complicating matters. Just a side note: one of the ongoing challenges to missions continues to be the notion of a personal relationship with God in many cultures not because it fails to appeal, but because it seems so utterly impossible to many whose reverence and fear has long forbidden them from approaching the divine. We have been scandalous for quite some time.

I think we understand our world in this way with God way up there, and us down here because it makes much better sense and is natively within us as this separation anxiety attests to. We have our broken world, our broken lives on one hand and a God whose holiness knows no bounds, whose otherness is beyond our comprehension on the other, and there is just no comparison. God comes to us and wants to be present to us, and often we make excuses: 'No Lord,' we say, 'we cannot receive you like this. We fail at our chores. We do not live up to our responsibilities. We are not faithful enough, not clean enough, not holy enough for you to come and participate in the symbols of our rebirth, our cleansing. We just aren't worthy of your presence, your love.' We know too well that the waters are not clean. We grieve that our world, in so many ways which both make headlines and go unmentioned, remains its broken self, despite our better efforts to change it, our better efforts to ignore the facts that congregate around us.

But here's the thing. No matter how quick we are to demure, or how much we protest, God in Christ comes and is with us. Is present to us. And that does not change. We have John the Baptist who is called to be—the one in the wilderness calling all to right living before God, for the change to come. When Jesus does appear on the scene, there we have the arguments over being

qualified to baptize or not, and then the baptized Christ conferred with this fundamental blessing: “This is my son, the beloved, in him I am well pleased.” Hardly words of prosecution and accusation, asking how this mess came into being. Matthew is recounting what John already realized; that Jesus was God in our midst, that this beloved son had waded into our midst, and is with us in the most supreme act of love the world has ever known. It is in this act of love, this breaking down of the barriers and speaking of the beloved child that the statement becomes about much more than just who Jesus is and what he is supposed to do. It is a launching of Jesus into who he is to be from that moment on. With a confirmation and calling like that, there is little wonder that Jesus needed to head right out into the desert to make sense of it all.

By wading into our circumstances in the form of the beloved son, God is also speaking to us. We do not have the voices of the cloud at our baptism, or within our life—not typically in any case--but the voice is speaking all the same; “You-- you are my child, my beloved. In you I am well pleased.” [repeat to sections]. In coming into our circumstances, ALL of our circumstances, we encounter the love of God, we are blessed by God and in God.

We forget that. We can forget that this is what this is all about, this body, this building, this existence is all about, is the very of love of the living God who comes into our messy, messed up world and calls us beloved, who offers all that God is, all that God has in order to be with us, come what may. We can forget that our baptism of love which is with each and every one of us from our very first breath, until our last is an unalienable and uncompromised reality for us. We can forget that what we do to reflect that love, to expand that love, and to live that love in our world is not about responsibility, qualifying for God’s favor, earning approval. Rather, we must do what we do because when we remember this baptism, when we remember this love come to us in human form and into human circumstances, we can do no other but respond in loving action and faithful witness ourselves. It is Christ in us that calls us to respond with the love of Christ around us. How would it change our understandings of the world if we could but remember the symbol of baptism is not so much one of belonging, and theological propriety, but rather a reminder of the great Love of the one who loved us from the very first, and a confirmation of servanthood in response to that love? Is that something we could celebrate? Is that something we could really rally behind?

I am not saying that doing things is unimportant. Faith must be much more than a mere box we tick and idea we profess. We must be about prayer, devotion, and service. These are the

means by which we grow in love and transmit love. It is my dream that we each might have such a keen sense of our belovedness that we would each be always finding new ways to love; to show love. We have responsibility to live out our lives as the Christians we proclaim ourselves to be, to grow in knowledge, devotion, and service. But that responsibility is not one of pleasing God. God is pleased with us. We must remember this. Ours is a responsibility of responding to the love that God has shown for us, remembering, and reflecting that love with all we meet and all that we do. All else is misplaced pride and un-productive guilt.

Martin Luther, the reformer spent many lonely years. He was ostracized and suspected of every crime in the book. He spent many lonely months hiding in the Wartburg castle, anxious over what came next or whether the authorities would finally fulfill the threats they had levied against him. In those months, the stories go, he wrote over and over again 'I am baptized' to remind himself of who he was and to whom he belonged.

My message to you this morning is simple; remember that you too are baptized in the love of God with us in all things, and all circumstances, regardless of whether you have had the public symbol or no. You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.' With words such as these, how can we but love in response? May we be given ears to hear this most important of messages, even over the muddy currents of our world rushing around us.