

“The Well-Pleased”

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

January 14, 2007, **9 am**, Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Everyone loves affirmation. We all like to have a pat on the back. Episode of The Office: “It is always nice feeling to know you did a good job because someone gives you proof of it.” My father really bought into this idea because he would buy \$1 frames by the crate-load for his employees and give them framed certificates for just about everything. He managed an apparel plant so some of the affirmations seem strange. You mastered learning how to wash clothes? Here’s your award. You were on-time every day for a month? Here’s your certificate. And what he discovered wasn’t that people threw the awards away as soon as they got them, but instead hung them in honor in their homes. For some, it was the first award they had ever received in their lives. Affirmation was not something they were used to, and they relished it when they got it.

Now, you might think since I receive plenty of affirmation in my job – not all of it positive but it is affirming – that I would not keep such things in my home, but recently Amy went through my boxes only to find certificates of merit for being in the band (not being the best in the band, but simply participating), awards for entering into a science fair (not winning it – at least not that year), and all sorts of little certificates that have no meaning at all – except to say something along the lines of “thanks for trying.”

But I think for so many of us, “thanks for trying” actually matters. What I am constantly amazed with – and reminded of as well – is that we all, at different times, think of ourselves as failures. Most of us dwell on our missteps and mistakes far more than our correct actions. If you get a 90 on a test, you quickly look to see what you got wrong. People ask you “What did you miss?” not “What did you get right?” It is amazing how we are much harder on ourselves than others. A verbal miscue is something we beat ourselves up over but most people can’t even remember.

And, yet, when someone says, “Good job”, it makes us stop and wonder, “Do they really mean it?” And once more, we are actually touched when we discover it is not just a nice comment but something that they were sincere about. A certificate or a pat on the back means something to us, probably more so in this century than in any other.

Why? Because we are more alone now than ever. Oh, you might be married with 2 kids, but these days people have fewer and fewer close friends than ever. We spend our days sending e-mails and not having lunch with our friends. Our phone conversations end abruptly with an “I’ve got to go because I need to place my order at Burger King” rather than at a place where the conversation ends. We are more and more isolated – more like islands than neighborhoods – these days. And because of that, we all want to feel accepted, valued, and needed. We all need to feel like we are more than simply worker drones, but that we stand out and matter.

What is amazing is that in today’s passage we find a moment of this: “You are my Son, with whom I am well pleased.” The Message translation says it even more glowingly: “You are my son, chosen and marked by love, pride of my life.” I tend to think the Message kind of over-does

it, but it sounds very much like what we might say to our child if we could say what we feel in our hearts. It is a strange moment – Jesus being baptized, an act of repentance that even John says in the Gospel of John makes no sense for one without sin – but it is made stranger with these words from Heaven. That Heaven spoke is strange, but the words that came out seem stranger.

You see, it is easy to rationalize that God spoke for the people's benefit. In John's Gospel, the writer kind of indicates that. Jesus says after His baptism, "Father, glorify my name" and God responds, "I have and will glorify it again." And the people react in wonder but Jesus says, "That was for your benefit, not mine." But that is in John's gospel, not Luke's. In Luke, God does speak for the benefit of the people: He says, "This is my Son; listen to Him!"

But I say all that to say this: God felt he needed to affirm our Lord. His words at Christ's baptism were not for our benefit, but for the Son's. The way things play out make that clear. Even Jesus needed this word of affirmation at this moment of His life. The human element of Christ desired that. He wanted to know that God was pleased with him. And God responds that He is well-pleased as he emerges from the water.

This seems like such a strange thing, but this is part of being baptized. It is that thing that we all want – to know that we are accepted, that we belong, that we are important. But the strange part is that baptism is a sign of acceptance not into the church or by our friends, but by our Lord. It is a symbol – a mark – of God's love for us. It is His way of saying, "With you I am well-pleased." Baptism is the ultimate form of acceptance. It is the ultimate means of belonging.

Now, there is so much more to Baptism than this. It is our desiring to change our life, to repent of our sins and turn our lives in a new direction, to be washed of our iniquities and be born again. Some even see it as our accepting of God's gift of the new life. But that isn't what we find in this moment in Jesus' life; baptism was God saying I like you. You are mine. The Message Bible's phrase, "You are marked by my love" does capture that incredibly well. The water might wear off, but God's love does not change.

And that is something that we all need – regardless if we realize it or not. We all need God's love. Even Jesus needed that sense that He was desired – and this is one that we say was both fully human and fully divine (don't ask me how – it's a mystery). We all want to know that we belong, that we are wanted, that we matter. That is what is happening at the fount. It didn't simply happen for Jesus that way; it happens for all of us that way. We may not hear angels sing, we may not receive heavenly proclamations, and we may only feel like we are experiencing some water hitting our heads, but something incredible happens in that moment – if you allow it to happen. You are no longer your own; you bear the mark of God's love on your soul and in your life.

I think that this is something we so often forget. It is something the world simply doesn't understand, for sure. We all go to such extremes to feel accepted. Youth men and women go to incredible extremes to feel a part of a group. They use drugs and alcohol, have sex, break the law, just to feel like they are a part of something bigger than themselves. Society says they don't

know better but most of the teenagers I've spoken to or read about that have fallen into this knew all too well. They just wanted to be accepted. They just wanted to be loved.

Where we fail so often as a church is that we forget that the most central message of our faith is that we are ALL accepted and loved by God. Instead, we, in our humanness, put conditions on that love. God will only love you if you are straight. God will only love you if you don't use drugs. God will only love you if you come to church every week – and attend Hank's Sunday night bible study starting January 21st. Well, maybe we don't say that last part, but we are so quick to judge who is loved and who isn't. But that isn't the message of the Gospel. God may not love our sinful nature – something we all share – and He certainly doesn't accept our sins as just something we have to do to make life livable – but His grace says that He loves us despite it. His message is that we are acceptable even when everything we do seems unacceptable. Baptism is God accepting us. Our every choice after that is us deciding if we are going to accept Him by loving Him back, by seeking to live a life like His, by choosing a new life.

That is why, when an infant is baptized into the church, we give them cradle crosses and baptismal candles and certificates. It is kind of like Michael Scott said in the Office: "It is always nice feeling to know you did a good job because someone gives you proof of it." Until we open ourselves to experiencing God, it is nice to be reminded with these little symbols of God's love. The proof isn't the candle or the certificate – they are just opportunities to explain what that years ago, God accepted you at your baptism. He loves you. He chose you. You matter.

When people give us a certificate for learning to wash our clothes, it matters. When people say, "Good job" after a meeting, it matters. How much more can it possibly matter when God says, "You are my Son, my Daughter, with whom I am well pleased." It might do more than just make you feel special. It might just change your life.

Let us pray.