

Beloved and Free

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Baptism of the Lord

Psalm 29

¹Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. ²Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor. ³The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters. ⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. ⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon. ⁶He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. ⁷The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. ⁸The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. ⁹The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!" ¹⁰The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever. ¹¹May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

A few years ago, Ernie Miller went back to his fiftieth college reunion, and a powerful memory of a discovery during his college days made the local newspaper. In the mid-1960's he was president of his class at Belmont Abbey, a small Catholic college just west of Charlotte in Belmont, North Carolina. Founded in 1876 by Benedictine monks, many of whom were from Pennsylvania, Belmont Abbey is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The monks who settled there in the 1800's found a large granite block originally used as a utility stone by the Catawba Native Americans, and then that stone was moved to a dirt road intersection on the 600-acre property, where it was used as a slave auction block. The Monastery was founded long after the slave trading there, but the monks believed they could hear those slaves – long gone – still wailing and their chains rattling; their tortured memory not forgotten. The monks would go and pray at that stone. Ignorant of many Catholic and monastic practices, some of the Belmont locals became concerned the monks were slave worshippers, so the stone was buried behind the monastery and forgotten. That's where the student Ernie Miller comes in.

With a student construction job during a renovation of the college's chapel, Ernie was digging and discovered the stone after it had been buried for nearly a century. So, in the 1960's, when the Civil Rights Movement was working toward equality for all people, the monastery took the old slave stone to Charlotte. They had it sand-blasted, carved a bowl in the top of it, and returned it to the Belmont Abbey Chapel to be used as its baptismal font. It is inscribed with these words: "Upon this rock, men once were sold into slavery. Now upon this rock, through the waters of baptism, men become free children of God." ¹

The monastery preserved the sad memory and history of it, but in repurposing that old stone they made a bold theological statement about what baptism means. In baptism we renounce the power of evil, we are

¹ Eric Wildstein, Gastonia Gazette, 10/3/15.

cleansed of our sin, and we claim our identity as the beloved and free children of God.

Beloved and free is how we find Jesus in our gospel reading this morning, standing in the Jordan River under the good, redemptive care of John the Baptizer. Up until this point, the gospel writer has established Jesus' identity in a number of ways. By the opening genealogy, deeply rooted in the history of Ancient Israel, Jesus has been announced the Son of Abraham and the heir of David's throne. He is the human child of Mary, protected by Joseph. He is named Emmanuel – God with us. He is deemed a threat to the murderous King Herod, and declared a light to the nations by the Magi's visit. Now, in his baptism, his first act as an adult, Jesus affirms his identity for himself, and receives his commission from God.

In today's gospel story, the question that hovers over Jesus' baptism is – if he were without sin, why did he submit to the cleansing waters of John's baptism down by the river that day. Even John the Baptizer tries to prevent him saying, "I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?" Like the other people who followed John out into the wilderness to be baptized in the Jordan, Jesus was, in effect, saying: *I belong to the powers of the prophet crying in the wilderness... as if to say – I do not belong to the powers that be in Jerusalem. I do not belong to the seat of earthly, political, and military might. Mine is the Kingdom of God, not the Kingdoms of this world.*

At his baptism, Jesus rises up out of the water; suddenly the heavens are opened, the Spirit of God descends like a dove and alights on him. A voice from heaven is heard saying, "This is my Son, the *Beloved*, with whom I am well pleased." By submitting to the baptism of John, Jesus was declaring his freedom from earthly powers in service to this heavenly power. Hence, the new God-given name that descends upon him at his baptism is *Beloved*.

As one biblical scholar commented: "Whatever else Jesus' baptism may mean, it is the place where he learns definitively who he is in

relation to whose he is. At his baptism, Jesus is given the intertwined gifts of identity and affirmation.”² This is where the story of Jesus’ baptism intersects with the stories of our own. For in baptism, we too are named Beloved Child of God, and our initiation into the work of the Kingdom of God begins!

The great scholar and novelist we lost last year, Toni Morrison used to say: “I tell my students, ‘When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. Life is not just a grab-bag candy game.’”³

Friends, as with Jesus, in baptism we are named Beloved Child of God, and we are freed from the powers of this world, to do the work of ushering in the Kingdom of God. It is our blessed vocation; it is demanding; it is the work the world so desperately needs.

Let me tell you how this good work played out through the life of another congregation. Hobson United Methodist Church, in Nashville, Tennessee has been described as a “wildly diverse congregation.” It includes people with power and PhDs and folks who have never gone past the third grade; some members have two houses and others are living on the streets. And, as one church member who struggles with mental health issues said about her congregation, there are “those of us who are crazy and those who think they are not.”

A few years ago, a woman named Fayette found her way to the Hobson church. Fayette did not have a home; and she herself lived with mental illness and with the autoimmune disease, lupus. She joined the new member class and when the conversation turned to baptism, the sacrament grabbed Fayette’s imagination. The pastor teaching the class

² David Lose, “The Power of a Good Name,” 1/2/2011, workingpreacher.org.

³ Toni Morrison quotes online.

described baptism as “this holy moment, when we are named by God’s grace with such power it won’t come undone.”

In the class, again and again, Fayette would ask, “And when I’m baptized, I am...?” The class learned to respond, “Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.” “Oh, yes!” she’d say and the class would continue. The pastor described the day of Fayette’s baptism: “Fayette went under the water and came up spluttering, and cried, ‘And I am...?’” And we all sang, ‘Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’ ‘Oh, yes!’ she shouted as she danced around.

Two months later, the church received a call that Fayette had been assaulted on the streets, beaten up, and was at the county hospital. As the pastor came down the hallway, Fayette was pacing back and forth, saying: ‘I am beloved, precious child of God,’ then...catching herself in the mirror, face streaked with blood and tears, clothes torn and askew, when the pastor entered the room, Fayette started again, ‘I am beloved, precious child of God... and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I’ll be so beautiful I’ll take your breath away!’⁴

That’s what Fayette learned about baptism at Hobson Memorial United Methodist Church. Wherever her life took her – though impoverished by circumstance and illness – she learned how to claim her identity as a beloved child of God. She came to understand that sharing in a baptism with Jesus like his, she was always in close company with God.

You know, the gospels are insistently down to earth in their portrayal of God’s near proximity in the person of Jesus Christ. He eats and drinks with his friends and sinners, he walks the dusty roads of a backwater Roman province, He tells stories about farmers and crafty landowners, he likes outsiders – those who are scorned by others. When grown-ups act like children are a nuisance, Jesus says, do not keep them

⁴ Kim Clayton, “God’s Beloved,” preached at Montreat Worship and Music Conference, 2015.

from coming to me, and he blesses them. He loves and he heals; he gets angry at injustice and acts to correct social wrongs. All of these things are further confirmation of his identity – and ours, His vocation, and ours.

We are beloved by God; therefore, we are free to do the work of the Kingdom of God. Because in this person of Jesus, the heavens opened up, and our common humanity was blessed by God. Think about it. Jesus walked down to the river with people just like us: people seeking a new manifestation of God's presence. People were yearning for a word of hope, hoping for a world where people could be free from the oppressive, military might of the likes of Rome, and freed for the world God envisions – with abundant life for all.

Somehow, down by that river, those people trusted the wild eyed prophet John to point them toward a new God-given reality. And that is exactly what happened as Jesus himself came up out of the water. God said: This is my Beloved Child – for you. And because we are baptized in Christ, we too are Beloved and free to join in the work of building up God's Kingdom in the world.

If you are free, it is your baptismal vocation to free another. If you have power, it is your job, your calling to empower another.

AMEN.