



You Belong! TouchPoint for January 9, 2019

Luke 3:15 [NRSV] As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

The Baptism of Jesus: *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

"You are my Son, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

I have a favor to ask of you. I wonder if you could do something for me. When you get home from here, could you grab a Bible and look up the first 3 chapters of Luke. I think I'm missing some pages. I've got to be missing some pages. You see, in today's passage, we've got God saying from heaven to Jesus, *"You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."* But I can't find anything that Jesus has done before this to deserve God saying this about him.

I mean, before this passage all I have in my Bible is Jesus surviving birth, which is probably more of a credit to his mother Mary and his DNA—whatever that looked like! And then I have a story of Jesus irritating his parents as a 12-year-old. THAT'S IT! There has to be something missing, right?!

"You are my Son, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

We can't have a God going around and telling people they are loved and pleasing without them first doing something. We can't just go around handing out compliments and telling people they are accepted and they belong without them proving their worth. People need to know they are worthless scum of the earth until they can prove otherwise, particularly in economic terms. If not, they'll just turn into a bunch of snowflakes and expect a trophy for participating in this thing called life. Why they might even expect to be treated with dignity and respect as a fellow human being, rather than as people who deserve to be walled off from those of us on the inside. Who knows, they might even expect health care.

So please, will you go home and read your Bibles and tell me what Jesus did to deserve these words of grace from God. Will you please find those missing pages at the beginning of Luke for me! I mean, **"We can't have grace exist outside a system of reward and punishment, can we?"** What a Mystery that would be!!!

"You are my Son, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

What do we do with a God who operates outside of a system of reward and punishment? What do we do with a God who loves, accepts, and is well pleased with us before we do anything?

James Nestingen and Gerhard Forde put it well in their book, *Free to Be*, when they write about the first words of the 10 commandments, "I am the Lord your God." They write:

God has made a decision for you. God hasn't waited to find out how sincere you are, how devout or religious you might be, or how well you understand the Bible and the Catechism. God hasn't even waited to find out if you are interested or willing to take this decision seriously. God has simply decided. God made this decision knowing full well the kind of person you are. God knows you better than anyone else could—inside out, upside down, and backwards. God knows where you are strong and where you are weak, what you are most proud of and what you would most like to hide. Be that as it may, God's decision is made.

God comes right out and says it: "I am the Lord your God." This is the decision God has made. God has decided to be your God. For God wants to be as close to you as your next breath, to be the one who gives you confidence and value, to open a future to you in the freedom of the Word. God wants to be the one to whom you turn for whatever you need.

God has said this many times before, many times. God first announced this decision about you when you were baptized, "You," God said, as the pastor spoke your name, "are baptized in my name. I am your God and I will never let you go."

They then go on to talk about how God has said it since your Baptism too, speaking on the lips of those who have loved you, whether they were a part of your family, a teacher, or anyone else who welcomed you and let you know, "You belong!"

And in fact, God is saying it to you right now. You who are hearing this and you who are reading this, God is saying to you right now, "I am your God." And as my dad used to say, "Put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

Make no mistake about it. This is a reversal from how God is often portrayed, talked about, pictured. We always think we have to do something first. It's the old subject, verb, object thing. We have to act first, and then, God as judge, will decide after we are all done, whether to accept us or not.

But this baptism story, and where it is placed in Luke's gospel is a reminder that we have it all backwards. God accepts us, calls us 'sons and daughters' and is 'pleased with us' *before we do anything*. Make no mistake about it. This is a reversal from how God is often portrayed, talked about, pictured.

Recently, some in the evangelical community have come to express it this way. They like to say that most often Christianity has been presented as, "Behave, Believe, Belong." In other words, once you Behave properly and once you have proper Belief, then you can Belong, then God will let you come in. But some in that community are now saying that is not the way God works. God works from a "Belong, Believe, Behave" model.

First and foremost, YOU BELONG! And everything flows from this. All belief and behavior comes out of the experience of knowing one belongs, one is loved and accepted and claimed as a child of God, unconditionally, before anything else.

Now if you get this concept, if you see what I am trying to say here, then you might have an insight into why some faith communities baptize infants. Look, I'm not interested in arguing about infant baptism. I got kicked out of a Young Life group over this issue 45 years ago so I'm not interested in arguing, but I am interested in sharing the perspective with you.

I have had people tell me my baptism is invalid because I was only 3 weeks old when it happened. When I ask them why that invalidates it they say, "Because you didn't understand what was happening. You didn't accept it." And my response is, "**Exactly!**" That usually leads to a prolonged period of silence on their part and so I continue.

"Exactly, God accepted me and claimed me and called me 'son' before I knew what was happening, before I did anything, thought anything, decided anything. I think that's called grace. And in that respect, God is like my parents. After I was born, they brought me home from the hospital, gave me food and shelter, made me a part of the family, before I knew or understood who they were or what food and shelter was. Would you rather they had left me at the hospital until I reached some "age of accountability" and decided to accept them as 'my personal mother and father' before they brought me home? – I think not!!!"

For those faith communities that practice infant baptism, in baptism God is the subject. God's activity is the verb, and we are the object. *"You are my Son, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased."* You are Mystery's beloved child, *before you do anything*.

Look, the first words of the 10 commandments, Luke's narrative of Jesus' baptism, Belong, Believe, Behave, Infant baptism—it's all saying the same thing. In the beginning, in our beginning, there is God, there is the Mystery, and we are declared 'Good', 'Beloved', 'Pleasing'—before we do or understand anything. God as subject. God as verb. Us as object of Divine grace.

And what is true at the beginning is also true at the end. This is why St. Paul talks so much about universal restoration and ALL THINGS being united in Christ. This is why the book of Revelation speaks of Christ as the Alpha and the Omega. The beginning and the end are the same. And what is true at the beginning and the end is also true in the middle

In the night in which he was betrayed, before Judas betrayed and Peter denied and Thomas doubted; before they did anything unworthy much less anything worthy of a reward...

Jesus took bread and wine and said, "This is me for you, **before** you do anything and **in spite of** anything you do, you are my beloved."

God in the beginning. God in the middle. God at the end. God declaring for all the world to hear, "You are my BELOVED CHILD, and I am PLEASSED WITH YOU."

So do me a favor, when you go home, grab a Bible, only instead of looking for what's missing in Luke 3, just read what's there.

"You are my BELOVED CHILD, and I am PLEASSED WITH YOU."

Amen.