

January 12, 2020
“Beloved”
Matthew 3:13-17
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Some of you know that my day job—don't worry, I haven't quit my day job!—is as a grant writer at Pendle Hill, a Quaker education and retreat center in Wallingford. Among the many spiritual and education programs it offers, Pendle Hill has a couple of public art galleries on campus, with rotating exhibits throughout the year.

There's one up now called “Botanical Explorations,” featuring colorful paintings of plants. I'm not particularly drawn to the art itself, to be honest, but I was struck this week by something the artist, Carol Sexton, said about her process and what inspires her.

She describes first photographing plants during her travels and then using those photos as a basis for her painting. She writes, “I like to move in close and paint a subject larger than life, as a way of drawing viewer's attention and appreciation to details that might otherwise be overlooked.”

Now if that's not gospel truth I don't know what it is. Moving in close. Paying attention to the details. Looking and seeing where and what and how others do not. Think Good Samaritan. The Woman at the Well. Zacchaeus. Bartimaeus. This is Jesus in a nutshell. This is the Jesus we are invited to take seriously.

“This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

You may remember that during Advent we are introduced to John the Baptist as he travels the “wilderness” baptizing whoever came to him, and preaching a message of repentance to whoever would listen. “Repent, for the kin-dom of heaven has come near.” “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” He is said to be the one, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah, who will prepare the way of the Lord.

John knows there's something special about this Jesus, of course. "I baptize you with water for repentance," he says, "but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

For that reason, John resists when Jesus comes to him to be baptized. "I'm not worthy (even) to carry your sandals," he says just before our reading. You should be baptizing me.

This story of Jesus' baptism, found in all four gospels, is most noteworthy, of course, for the baptism itself. We'll get to that in a minute. But I don't want us to miss this critical thread—BEFORE the baptism itself—because it points to the whole garment of Jesus' ministry. For all the Advent anticipation surrounding Jesus' coming—from the star-led visit of the magi, to Herod's intended violence, to John's making way—Jesus' response to John, RIGHT HERE, confirms what we've been waiting for. It sets the stage for everything that follows. It lets us know clearly what Jesus was about.

Again we hear John, in verse 11: "I'm not worthy to carry your sandals." Or otherwise translated, "I am not worthy to untie the thong on (your) sandals." And in verse 13: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

And how does Jesus respond? "Nonsense!" Without hesitation, with what will become his trademark clear-mindedness and humility, he levels the field. "Nonsense!"

"Let it be so now," he says. And here the now 30-year-old teacher, who by the way just one chapter earlier in Matthew was a newborn baby, fleeing with his family for his life, starts teaching. The author of Matthew's gospel skips over a lot!

"For it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." In other words, forget everything you think you know about worthiness. And while you're at it, forget everything you think you know about kings. And forget everything you think you know about me.

Through the simple act of insisting that John baptize him, Jesus affirms John's inherent worthiness. And for the first time that we know of, throws all conventional notions about worthiness out the window. Forget everything you think you know, he says.

We know that worthiness is itself a social construct, a tool used by those in authority to justify and reinforce their authority. A tool used by the absolutely and relatively powerful and power-hungry, on large and small scales, to justify and reinforce their own power and privilege. We are in and THEY are out. We are deserving and THEY are not.

It's blood-soaked human history, it's socio-economic history, it's political history, it's religious history.

It's today's headlines.

It's purity codes. It's caste systems. It's crusades.

It's slavery and Jim Crow and the new Jim Crow.

It's racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, white nationalism, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim, xenophobia.

It's the GI Bill and blockbusting and redlining.

It's glass ceilings and welfare queens and a \$7.25 minimum wage.

It's three strikes you're out and mandatory minimums.

It's border walls and ISIS.

It's God hates fags and "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."

It's asbestos-filled schools and unfair funding formulas.

It's poll taxes and literacy tests and voter ID laws.

It's reservations and ghettos and gated communities.

It's genocide.

It's land theft and extinct species and climate change.

Forget everything you think you know about worthiness, says Jesus, the radical, poor, brown-skinned refugee. You don't get to decide who is worthy and who is not because worthiness just is. This is what Jesus is about. This is the thread in the garment. We should not miss this moment in the story.

And we haven't even gotten to the actual baptism yet. It gets better!

John consents and baptizes Jesus in the river Jordan, with all of its historic significance in the Jewish narrative.

And when Jesus came up from the water, verse 16 now, “suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.” “And,” I would add here, paralleling the story of the transfiguration which comes later, “a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. This is my Beloved. *Agapitos*, from the Greek root for love, *agape*. Beloved.

Jesus’ baptism is about identity. Rumors are already spreading and imaginations running wild about who this Jesus is, and who he will become, but this voice from heaven, the voice of God, cuts to the core. He is Son of God. Child of God. Beloved. This is fundamentally who Jesus is.

This is profound. Understood in the broader narrative context within Matthew’s gospel, I’m also struck by what comes after this story of Jesus’ baptism—beyond our reading this morning.

What comes after, at least in the three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), is the story of Satan’s temptation of Jesus in the desert. Satan’s attempts to pull Jesus away from his identity, his center, his belovedness. To try, quite literally, to make him prove his worth.

This is what the world does. It tries to pull you away from your identity, from your center, from your fundamental belovedness. It assigns and denies worth, or makes you prove it. By what you do. By how productive you are. By what you can afford. By how smart you are. By how you look. By how you talk. By whom you love. Even the earth is put to the test, its inherent beauty and bounty overlooked.

But Jesus says to John, and God says to Jesus, and so they say collectively to all creation: You don’t have to prove it. There’s nothing to prove. You are beloved. You are worthy. That is your identity. That is who you are. And who and what you are is enough.

Now in John's gospel, the baptismal account is followed immediately by Jesus' calling of the first disciples—by which we might take to heart the importance of surrounding ourselves with those who will affirm and continually re-affirm our inherent belovedness. Those who will hold up the mirror and remind us, when we need reminding, that we are God's beloved.

For many of us that kind of community begins with our families, and tragically, for many it does not. Jesus will later bust open the narrow, shortsighted definition of family at least in part, I think, for this reason. Blood or not, we are family when we see each other as beloved. When we move in closer, when we pay attention to the details and see what others might overlook. When we see each other as we are.

You are likely familiar with “Namaste,” or sometimes Namaskar or Namaskaram, the customary Hindu greeting used in India and throughout South and Southeast Asia, and among the Hindu diaspora worldwide. With or without the accompanying gesture, it literally means, I bow to the Divine in you. The Divine in me greets the Divine in you. Or if you will, the beloved in me greets the beloved in you. I see you as you are. I see you.

This, friends, is the good news of our collective faith traditions. The good news of Jesus. The good news of baptism. I am beloved. You are beloved. We are beloved. God has made it so.

Alice Walker writes, “I am an expression of the divine, just like a peach is, just like a fish is. I have a right to be this way . . . I can't apologize for that, nor can I change it, nor do I want to . . . We will never have to be other than who we are . . . We realize that we are as ourselves unlimited and our experiences valid. It is for the rest of the world to recognize this, if they choose.”

So let the world choose, or not, but hold your identity, your center. Don't forget that we are expressions of the divine, *Imago Dei*, made in the image of God, beloved—even as we recommit ourselves to working toward a world where we might all see and treat each other accordingly.

Namaste. May it be so.