

## Jan 11      Dearly Loved

Mark 1:4-11

The second Sunday of the year always celebrates Jesus' baptism. The sacrament of baptism has been one of those divisive issues that has splintered the body of Christ. Some groups believe that the only valid baptism is a believer's baptism while others support the baptism of infants. Some groups believe that it is only through their form of baptism can a person be saved. Without it you are left outside of God's grace. While others go so far as to say baptism is not needed at all, just a belief in God for God welcomes all. My guess is that most of us are somewhere in the middle range of these contrasting theologies or don't really care. I am not going to be able to solve these issues but do want to look at this story from Jesus' life, one of the few that is found in all four of the Gospels.

Jesus' cousin John was preaching in the wilderness a message of repentance. You would think a message such as that would turn people off but it says all of Judea flocked to hear him and to be baptized. Jesus was one of those. It was a turning point in his life. From this point forward he begins his own teaching and healing ministry. We all need these moments, perhaps more than one, when we draw a line, leaving the past behind and move forward with renewed faith and purpose.

I want you to think about your life. Where have your moments of commitment been? Perhaps one of those times was your baptism, if it was as an adult, or confirmation, if you had been baptized as a child. Maybe you see your wedding as such a time. Perhaps you can think of other moments when you took a good long hard look at your life and made a decision. You mentally drew a line and what was past is past and you moved into the future with renewed purpose. As we begin a new year you need to ask yourself, "Do I need to make another statement of commitment this year?"

I recall the story of a person who came to a new year. They had been in a verbal war with another member of their family for some time. Hurtful things were said by both parties and she took every opportunity available to tear down this person to other people in her family. That year she looked at her life and her actions and felt ashamed.

She decided that she was going to treat this person with respect no matter how she was treated in return. She was going to forget what had happened in the past. As she wrote she talked about how hard it was, at first, to not fall back into her old patterns. She kept at it and when the other person found that she was unwilling to keep the war going she too began to dial back the rhetoric. It took years but they are at peace with one another. All of this happened because she made a commitment, in faith, to live differently.

Beyond this moment of commitment, symbolized in his baptism Jesus heard “you are my son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.” I firmly believe that these words are not just for Jesus, they are for us. I want to explore their meaning for us.

What does it mean to hear you are God’s child? I don’t know about you but this is such a comforting thought. Life can be hard. When I was young and the problems of life were bigger than I could handle I would go find my dad. We would talk about what was going on, think about strategies for dealing with the situation and then I was ready to go forward and handle them. If I wasn’t sure I could deal with it alone, he would almost always say, “Do you want me to go along?” He went not to take care of the situation but to support me. In his standing there, I would gain the strength and courage to tackle the situation because I knew I was not alone. Then I grew up and for a while I felt the need to exert my independence and things did not go so well. Then as I matured I again turned to dad, more as an equal partner whose life experiences I knew would give him insights into what I was facing that I had not thought about. This is what I miss the most, not having Dad here. One of the things I have learned in my faith journey is that I can turn to God as easily as I had turned to Dad. God is with me, giving me the support I need, giving me direction and guidance and love. We are promised this and so we need to not make the mistake of trying to be too independent and think we can handle things on our own. Or, that we need to handle most things and only go to God for the really big things. But to instead remember God calls us God’s children and, as a child, that support and encouragement are there for us to rely upon every day, but particularly during the difficult days of life.

What does it mean to hear that “You are dearly loved” by God. That is a concept that is hard for us to grasp, at least at times. We know God loves us but we sometimes

think that God only loves the “going to church” persona that we put on each Sunday. We are skeptical that God would dearly love some of the “other” aspects of our life. But we are dearly loved. Think about your children and grandchildren. Almost immediately smiles cross our faces. When we think of them we are filled with the warmth that comes with love. Now we know they are not perfect. In fact they can sometimes be quite challenging in their actions, but we still love them. God wants you to know that when God thinks about you, that smile of love comes upon the face of God.

And here is the most astounding idea, “God finds happiness in you” just as he found happiness in Jesus. Too often we hold onto Old Testament images of a God who is angry with the people and who punishes the people. We let this cloud Jesus’ image of a God who so loves us that God gave us Jesus. And if God loves us, God finds happiness, or delights, in us. Again think of your children and grandchildren, especially when they are small. Think about how much happiness and delight they give you. Even when they are tired and cranky you still find much happiness in them. You look forward to their being with you and around you. In God’s eyes you are just like a little child. You have your good moments but also your tantrums. Because God loves you God finds happiness in you. It is an awesome thought.

We do want to please our heavenly parent. Just as a child or grandchild really wants to behave, so we too want to act in the best way possible for God. A child instinctively knows that things go better for them when they follow directions, act appropriately and all the rest. We know it too.

The scriptures state that soon after hearing these words of love and blessing Jesus goes into the wilderness for a time of reflection. He struggled with temptations as he figured out what God wanted for him and his ministry. And then he goes forth, calling disciples and beginning his teaching and healing ministry. We too need to take some time on a regular basis to reflect on what it means to be an obedient child of God. We all struggle with temptations. Where we have resisted we need to give thanks knowing God takes great delight in our success. Where we have given into temptations we need to ask for forgiveness but know that we are still loved. And from these times of reflection

chart the strategies we need to embrace as we go forward. We want to behave and this is part of why we are here this Sunday.

God is asking us to not take this message lightly. We are asked to reflect upon it and strive to live as one beloved each and every day wanting to bring the most happiness we can to the one who loves us.