

Isaiah 42:1-7
Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:15-17

“You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” These were the words God proclaimed when Jesus was baptized. We all need to be beloved by someone. Psychologist Abraham Maslow, in 1943, developed a theory he called a hierarchy of needs, that came to full expression in his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality*. Most people who have taken psychology classes have studied his theory. For a person to become a whole person, there is a hierarchy of needs to be met. The lowest need needs to be met before you climb up the pyramid. When all of your needs have been met, Maslow refers to that as self-actualization, when we become the most that we can be. One of those needs is that of love and belonging. Humans need to love and be loved by others. We need a sense of love and belonging. We need to hear from others, “You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

These are words proclaimed when we are baptized. In our baptism God declared to us, “You are my child, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” You are my beloved. Sometimes we may wonder how can God love us. We may wonder if we are lovable. In spite of the fact that God knows us better than anyone can ever know us, God still declares us God’s beloved. God loves us, and there is nothing we can do about it.

However, the most important part of this passage is also a challenge to us. Americans seem to be obsessed with self-esteem. Don’t get me wrong. Good self-esteem is healthy. We need self-esteem to be a whole person., to be, as Maslow calls it, self-actualized. If you notice on his hierarchy of needs, esteem is the next highest level of need above love and belonging. What is most important about this passage is

our being possessed by the Holy Spirit. Baptism isn't just being put into some water. It is nothing less than being possessed. I am not saying that we as Christians are possessed, although sometimes I wonder. What I mean by that is in our baptism we were possessed by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit directs us and drives us. Of course, what this implies is that baptism is not the ending of our ministry, but just the beginning.

In Matthew's story, the Spirit drives Jesus' ministry, empowers his ministry. The Holy Spirit shows up during important events in Jesus' life. Mary was "found to be with child from the holy Spirit." Jesus receives the holy Spirit in his baptism. Following his baptism, he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The baptism of Jesus was not the ending of his ministry. It was the beginning of his ministry. It was his inauguration, his initiation. One could say that Jesus' baptism was his ordination to ministry.

Baptism is our ordination to ministry. Each and every one of us are ministers. One of our reformed beliefs is the priesthood of all believers. As members of the community of faith, as participants in God's church, we are, each and every one of us, a priest. There is no hierarchy of office in the reformed faith or Presbyterian polity. In our reformed faith, people who hold are not higher up on a hierarchy. This morning we will be ordaining elders. In our reformed faith, to ordain someone does not mean we place them higher on a hierarchy of servants within the church. Ordination is nothing more than setting aside these persons for the ministry of ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church. Holding an office in Presbyterian polity does not make the office holder any higher than any church member. The ordination of pastors—or what we call teaching elders in our tradition—does not place pastors above ruling elders or any church

member. There is no hierarchy of church offices. Baptism is your ordination for ministry, your ordination for service. Baptism is your ordination for ministry. Your baptism is the beginning of your ministry, of all of our ministries.

How do we understand our baptism as preparing us for a life of service? We are baptized into a community of faith, into the church. Baptism is not an act of individualism, contrary to what many think. In our understanding of the Reformed faith baptism is an act of the worshiping community and must be done as a part of a worship service. Exceptions can be made. We are baptized into Christ, which is the body of Christ. In our baptism we are incorporated into a community of faith. Our ministry is done within and among the community of faith.

This community of faith forms us. Stanley Hauerwas, a theologian and ethicist writes that we are called to be a community “capable of forming people with virtues sufficient to witness to God’s truth in the world.” Greg Garrett, an English professor points out that Harper Lee’s book *To Kill a Mockingbird* offers a powerful vision of a community that has the potential to form those under its charge in one of two ways. Into people of tolerance, love, and bravery, or into people of hatred, bigotry, and greed. Scout Finch, who narrates the novel, and her brother Jem are formed by their father Atticus, their maid Calpurnia, their neighbors, and by others into people with great virtues. Atticus takes on a case of defending a black man accused of raping a white girl. The Finch family faces harsh criticism in the heavily racist Maycomb. They act against the segregation, discrimination, and bigotry of Jim Crow context of Alabama during the Depression. The church needs to be like Atticus and the others and others of Maycomb, Alabama, whose lives and actions created a community of tolerance, love, and bravery.

The anecdotes I hear of people experiencing expressions of hatred and bigotry are unacceptable in a nation that claims to be a Christian nation. At least five California mosques received letters from a group calling itself “Americans for a Better Way, that referred to Muslims and “vile” and evil.” Graffiti declaring “Make America White Again. The bank CEOs who should bear some of the responsibility for the great recession of 2008 came out smelling like roses while many experienced financial ruin and set-backs. The actions of the banks too big to fail back in 2008 illustrated how acceptable greed is in our society. Following his baptism, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. In the ordination rite this morning, there is a renunciation of evil. When we baptize, there is a renunciation of evil. The early church understood demonic forces to be real. The early church understood baptism as a signal to those demonic forces that Christians were ready to do battle against their influence in the Christian’s life and in the world. Bigotry, hatred, and greed are demonic forces. The church today does not necessarily believe in literal demons, but we certainly believe that there are demonic forces in the world. In our words and in our actions we too need to renounce these evil powers, renounce hatred, bigotry, and greed.

God declared in our baptism, “You are my child, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We are possessed by the Holy Spirit in our baptism, and driven to a life of ministry. We are members of the church, the body of Christ. The church needs to be forming a community of love and tolerance and a concern for the common good. Will your actions, will your words, help form a community of love, tolerance, and bravery?

Praise the Lord!

Happy are those who delight in God’s word. Amen.