

**Sermon:** Reclaim Our Identity  
**Text:** Matthew 3:13-17 NLT  
**God's Word:** Romans 6:1-11 NLT  
**Date:** Sunday, September 10, 2023  
**Preacher:** Rev. Becky Stephens

***Matthew 3:13-17 NLT***

*<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. <sup>14</sup> But John tried to talk him out of it. "I am the one who needs to be baptized by you," he said, "so why are you coming to me?" <sup>15</sup> But Jesus said, "It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires." So John agreed to baptize him. <sup>16</sup> After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy."*

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Tony was a formerly homeless man who lived in a church shelter. He had lived on the streets of New York City for half of his life. One night, at dinner, he told the other people at the table that it was his birthday. They weren't sure they believed him and so Tony gave them proof: he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his birth certificate.

Then Tony asked, "Want to see my baptismal certificate?" His baptismal certificate showed that he was baptized as a child at an Episcopal Church on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Just imagine. Tony had carried his baptismal certificate around with him for all those years as he wandered the streets of Manhattan. Why did he do that? Why was that such an important document to him?

In our Gospel Lesson for this morning Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist. John, of course, is horrified. "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John protests. Then Jesus responds, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."

Why do you suppose Jesus insisted on being baptized? It's not as if He had sin to repent of. One answer to this question has to do with identity. We are told that as soon as Jesus was baptized, "heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'"

The baptism of Jesus reveals His identity to both Jesus and to us as well. He is the beloved Son of God. And this identity must give Him confidence as He moves ahead with His ministry, defending Himself to those who question Him and to the devil who tempts Him. God's voice from heaven must sustain Jesus as He is later declared a criminal and crucified by the worldly powers. Others will label Him a liar. But God declares Him to be God's beloved Son.

And as Christians this is our identity as well—sons and daughters of Christ. As Paul writes in Romans Chapter 6: “don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” And the Holy Spirit we receive for this new life brings about our adoption to sonship and daughter-ship of God. “And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’”

In fact, we are told that the Spirit of God testifies with our spirit that we are God's children...heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. If we are followers of Jesus, we, like Jesus and because of Jesus—are beloved children of God--those in whom God is well-pleased. I don't know about you, but that blows my mind.

When I was in college, I was having a bit of an identity crisis. I had felt God calling me to preach for quite some time and I finally got up the nerve to act on it. The pastor at the freewill Baptist church where I was raised gave an altar call and invited anyone to come down that felt called into the ministry. I now know that he was aiming at the white-headed man sitting behind me. But I got up and made my way to the altar. This was my chance. The pastor then pulled me aside and told me I could sing in the choir and teach Sunday School, but I would never preach from that pulpit. I was crushed. I felt so strongly that God had called me and yet, the very church that had nurtured me and taught me about this very God who has called me is saying that I must have heard wrong. I wasn't listening. To believe that God was calling me into ministry meant that I would be living outside the will of God—according to that church. Ultimately, it meant that I was headed to hell.

I felt abandoned by God. I had harbored this calling my whole life and to feel like God had given me the perfect moment to name it and then to have the rug pulled out from under me—it was quite a blow to my system. In that moment, I felt abandoned by God and truly felt like God had made a mockery out of me. It's not a good place to be.

Have you ever felt as if God didn't love you, couldn't love you? Have you ever felt you have gotten so off track that God has given up on you or you should just give up on God? Maybe you feel like that now.

In any event, one day I was sort of aimlessly walking across campus as I was struggling with these feelings of possibly not being loved by God. And on my walk, I happened into the college hang out space—Isaac's. It was a little deli/convenient store but had a pool table, big screen tv and a juke box. And coming out of the speakers of that jukebox was the song by Billy Joel, "I love you just the way you are."

And because of what I was going through, I felt as if God's Voice was speaking to me through the lyrics of that song. I felt as if God were saying to me: "Becky, I created you. I love you. I rescued and saved you. You are my beloved daughter. I am pleased with you. I love you just the way you are. Sure, you've got a lot of things in your life that we need to work out, and we will. We have a long, exciting journey ahead." That was a turning point for me. I felt real grace.

After Jesus came up out of the water, God was saying to Jesus, in essence, "You are my beloved Son. I am pleased with You. I love you just the way You are." And that is the same thing God desires for you to hear from Him as well.

Our baptism and place in God's Kingdom is what gives us our identity. The problem is that sometimes we forget this, and we start listening to other voices that confuse us. Maybe we hear voices when we are children through report cards that tell us we are not smart enough. As teenagers we hear voices through the cruelty of other teens who tell us that we are not cool enough. As adults, we hear voices that tell us that we are not successful enough or that we don't have enough money. We often hear voices through the media and sometimes other people that our bodies are not attractive enough.

And somehow, God's voice gets drowned out, and we listen to these other voices, and we may believe these other voices, and we are tempted to forget who we are. But the truth is that we are all of infinite sacred worth. For the God for Whom and through Whom everything was created, became one of us and one with us...lived as a human being...took our place on the Cross and shed His precious blood for us. So that through His life and death we may share in His glory.

We are VERY important indeed...and that is because we are loved and purchased by God. But even so, there are times when we also forget that everyone else in the world is equally loved by God as well.

As we meet homeless persons, perceive others as unattractive, or interact with people we feel are lazy, dishonest or even mean and cruel we sometimes forget that God loves them just as much as God loves us.

And, you know what? No matter who you are—you too have had times when you were unattractive to others or thought of as lazy...perhaps you have been dishonest at times...maybe you have been mean, cruel even. Does that mean God doesn't love you? No.

We are all in the same boat on this one. If we were without sin, then Jesus wouldn't have needed to come and die. And so, we go to Jesus, knowing that we have forgotten Who we, and Whose we are, and we repent. We ask God to forgive us for forgetting. We ask God to forgive us for hurting others; not loving others as God loves them. And we ask God to create in us new hearts that are open to love for all. And we ask God for new eyes, to see others as God sees them. And this is utterly miraculous.

It is what makes us truly human as we are living out our identities as God's children—as people of God. It's a beautiful thing, really, to see people loving people. It's a beautiful thing to see people helping other people, forgiving other people, offering grace to other people, smiling at other people. It is how we were created to be. When we go against this, as followers of Christ, we go against who we are and who we are called to be. And we can't be happy living like this.

You know, when Jesus tells John that He must be baptized by him “to fulfill all righteousness,” it exposes the most characteristic feature of Who Jesus is; Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, Who humbly obeys the will of God. He is our Trailblazer. He is our Savior Who obediently goes along with being the TRUE HUMAN Who can save us from our sins. And a voice from heaven said: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

And it is through God's grace and God's grace alone that you and I—as those who accept Christ's free gift of salvation through faith—are given the utmost privilege of all privileges to stand beside Jesus Christ as God declares: “This is my son, my daughter, with whom I am well pleased.” This is our identity. We are loved by God. We are saved by Jesus. And at baptism we declare that love and grace, and then journey on to declare it with our lives! We are people who God loves and claims as His own.

Have you ever thought of yourself that way? Do you think of yourself first and foremost as one of God's beloved? That is where we are to gain our confidence in life and find out who we are. This is what shapes who we are to become. God loves you. God loves me. Do you believe this? Is it who you are?

Even as others, through their actions or words declared Tony to be worthless, he continued to carry his baptismal certificate and his birth certificate in his pocket. His birth certificate proved that he had parents who birthed him and named him. His baptismal certificate reminded him that God and a congregation of believers had loved him and claimed him. And here he was, so many years later, sitting at a church and having dinner with these new friends. Tony is a beloved child of God.

As we live through our days and hear others judge us we need to remember God's voice at Jesus' baptism. And as we hear ourselves put someone else down for cutting us off in traffic, bothering us for money or food or whatever it is, we need to listen again to God's voice at Jesus' baptism.

Those who in repentance and faith follow Jesus through baptism and along the road He will lead us will find, if we listen, that same voice from heaven speaks to us as well. May it be so. Praise God. Amen.