

Text: Matthew 3: 13-17
Title: Longing to Hear
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My father was murdered when he was 50 and I was 24. Our relationship was complicated. He was a history professor and a thoughtful, serious, Christian man; I was a seminary student who specialized in struggling and screwing-up....

I was barely passing my classes. I sat in the back row, kept my distance from the professors, and mostly wondered what I was doing there. I was quick to skip class to go for a run. The thought of working in a church was suffocating so I worked at an outdoor outfitters store. I always seemed to be broke – not because I wasn't making money but because I wasn't keeping money. Sandi and I were engaged but the stink of my dating history hung in the air. I regularly drank too much. Which led to skipping more classes for long punishing cleansing runs. I'd served two internships at Roseland Christian Ministries Center and that was the only place that made any sense to me; but it was also dangerous and exotic and raw and everybody was messed up like me.

My mother and father were wonderful parents but I spent most of my 24 years pushing against them. My sins were my own. And then my dad was killed before I was a husband, father, teacher, writer, or pastor. He knew me as a struggling screw-up. I never knew his blessing....

I'm sure that in pushing back I didn't hear what he was pushing forward, but later in life I realized that the only way I knew my dad's blessing was to construct it. I never heard him say,

This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.

Dear friends, there is a deep human need to hear the blessing of a parent, or know the blessing of a partner, or believe the blessing of God. There is in all of us the longing to hear that we are loved and accepted and in fact pleasing to others.

But, a lot of us have tapes playing in our heads
that we're not good enough,
that we're a disappointment,
that we're too dim, too lazy, too wrong, too much,
that we're struggling screw-ups.

And, somehow those tapes are louder and more believable than the voices of blessing.

One way to read the baptism of Jesus is as a story of blessing.

The birth of baby Jesus in Bethlehem is not recorded in all the gospels but the baptism of Jesus is. You will find it in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and alluded to in John.

In writing the story of Jesus,
the gospel writers saw the baptism of Jesus,
as essential to understanding Jesus.

And in that spirit: Jesus joining John in the Jordan is not a baptism of repentance to wash away the sins of a wayward youth, but it has to do with Jesus finding his place with humanity and finding his place with God.

Now. There is no way of knowing how self-aware Jesus was. We don't know if his divinity dawned on him or how his humanity unfolded for him. There is no way of knowing how his sense of self was formed. What we know is the gospel narrative.

Jesus wanders over to the banks of the Jordan and slips in among the people being baptized. John balks. Jesus affirms that his baptism is proper to fulfill right relationship. John consents....

And, then all manner of cosmic drama breaks out: The membrane between heaven and earth is split, the Spirit descends, the Son ascends, and the voice of the God speaks over the waters. There is something here that is powerful, cinematic, seminal, mythic....

Kathleen Norris writes of it:

The occasion of his baptism is so momentous that we are jolted all the way back to the first chapter of Genesis, as the separation of earth and sky that God established at creation is refigured. God breaks through in order to speak directly to human beings.

Let's just sit with that for a moment.

The Trinity is present: Creator, Son, and Spirit.
There is a separation of earth and sky and water.
There is a new Adam.
And, there is the voice of God announcing his blessing:

This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.

Or,

God saw all that he had made and it was very good.

The words of blessing in Genesis 1 and Matthew 3 have the same sense of deep affirmation and contentment. There is here a kind of reboot, a re-Genesis, a new beginning. It is a new picture of what God intends for humanity. It is a picture of right relationship, belonging, and blessing.

But I wonder who the voice was for.

Did God speak that Jesus would hear,
or that John would hear,
or that the crowds would hear?

Oddly enough, there is no mention of who actually hears the voice from heaven. Our text reads that Jesus saw the Spirit descend like a dove and alight on him, but there is no indication that anyone heard the voice. There's no mention of John hearing it – the same John who inquires later if Jesus is the Messiah or should they wait for another. And actually, in Matthew's telling of the baptism of Jesus, there is no mention of any others being present. Nor is it followed with reports of people hearing God speak and then following Jesus.

So, one can make the case that God was speaking, in some fashion, to Jesus.

As Jesus identified with humanity,
as Jesus emptied himself even unto death,
as Jesus found his place in and among people rather than heavenly beings,
as Jesus was baptized,
he heard the blessing of God.

Did Jesus need to hear it?

Did Jesus need to hear the blessing of God?

Does a son need to hear that he is loved and pleasing to his father?
Does a daughter need to hear that she is loved and pleasing to her mother?
Does a wife need to hear that she is loved and pleasing to her husband?
Does a friend need to hear that he is loved and pleasing to his friend?

To the extent that Jesus is fully human he needs to hear that he beloved.

And, the story that Matthew tells next is the temptation in the wilderness. You'd be hard pressed to face down the devil without a clear sense of identity, belonging, and blessing. Agreed?

In the mid-1990s Dr. Mary Pipher made quite a splash with her book, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. In it she made the case that early adolescent girls often lose their identity and adopt false masks or fake identities. There was evidence in the transition from childhood to adolescence that girl's grades and achievement scores dropped, that they would often lose their resilience, optimism, assertiveness, energy, and "tomboyish" personalities, and that in exchange they became more deferential, self-critical, depressed, and often unhappy with their bodies.

In Pipher's words:

Girls know that they are losing themselves. One girl said, "Everything good in me died in junior high." Wholeness is shattered by the chaos of adolescence. Girls become fragmented, their selves split into mysterious contradictions. They are sensitive and tenderhearted, mean and competitive, superficial and idealistic. They are confident in the morning and overwhelmed with anxiety by nightfall. They rush through their days with wild energy and then collapse into lethargy. They try on new roles every week – this week the good student, next week the delinquent and next, the artist. And they expect their families to keep up with these changes.

Those are sweeping generalizations and this congregation is loaded with exceptions, but Pipher also points towards how much is at stake in developing a healthy sense of identity. Knowing that we are loved and accepted doesn't just fall into our laps, mysteriously emerge, or happen by happenstance. Identity is forged, formed, and learned. Knowing that we are loved is a life long journey. As we cast off false selves and discover our true selves, we are learning, relearning, and remembering who we are.

Dear friends, the heart of the gospel is that you are loved by God in Christ – of which baptism is a sign and a seal.

It is easy to forget or deny or dismiss that reality and chase after all sorts of other ways to feel beloved. But, it is next to impossible to believe that you are loved by an invisible God when you don't feel loved by a visible church.

Therefore, at its best the church, the gathering of the followers of Jesus Christ, is a tangible reminder of that blessing. An essential part of our calling is to say again and again and again, in as many ways as possible, and through as many people as possible:

This is my daughter, whom I love; with her I am well pleased.

This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.

Kids need to hear it. Old folks need to hear it. Struggling screw-ups need to hear it. Those who are barely holding it together and those who think they have it all buttoned down, need to hear it. Those who are empty of self and those who are stuffed full of self, need to hear it. And our efforts together in education and worship and mission and service and Bible study and making music and everything else that we do are ways to voice and echo and explore that reality.

At its best church is the community wherein you can be yourself. You don't have to be good enough or smart enough or athletic enough. You don't have to perform for approval. Your worth is not measured by skill or accomplishment. You are simply loved by God in Christ. You are the beloved.

Oh, trust me. I know that some think this is all psycho-babbly-pablum. I know that for some the blessing is unique to Jesus and that it is by being united with humanity in death that Jesus fulfills all righteousness and therefore is loved, blessed, by God. And that may well be....

But, I also know that there is a deep human longing to be loved. So, as Jesus is united with us in his baptism, and as we are united with Jesus in our baptism, then we too are recipients of that blessing. What we don't always hear from others may we hear clearly from God:

You are my daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.

You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.

As a tangible expression of being beloved the Elders will be stationed around the sanctuary and as Erin sings and plays you are invited to receive a sign of that blessing. They will speak to you and trace the sign of the cross on your forehead – with water. “You are loved by God in Christ.” There is no shame in remaining seated and there are no points in going forward. Our hope is that you are helped and encouraged by being reminded of your baptism – by being reminded that you are loved by God in Christ.

If you want to participate but are unable to easily come forward signal an Elder and they'll come to you. When all who want to have been blessed we will stand together to sing our hymn of response. Thanks be to God.

Amen.