

† Reading from the Gospel: Matthew 3:13-17

The Baptism of Jesus, Part II

Jan. 16, 2011

The Rev. Tom Hagood

Are you blessed? Have you been blessed? No ... I'm not talking about the material blessings you might have ... such as a warm bed, food in the fridge, a roof over your head. Those are wonderful blessings we sometimes take for granted in a world in which not everyone can claim such blessings.

No ... I'm talking about something else far more important than the blessings we have in our highly charged consumer-driven society. Those kind of blessings are temporary ... they never last ... those kind of blessings can even turn into curses when they take over our lives ... as we try to fill a giant hole in our gut with more and more things.

What I'm asking you this morning is to look deep into the mirror of your heart and consider these questions ... Are you blessed? ... Are you loved? ... Do you feel deep in your heart that no matter what you might do ... right or wrong ... that you are a blessed child of God and nothing ... absolutely nothing ... can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?

If you can feel that kind of blessing and love ... if you are sure of that in your heart ... than you ARE truly blessed. There is no greater sense of peace and love in your heart ... unconditional love ... then to know that God has blessed you and loves you and will always love you.

Unfortunately ... not everyone can feel that blessing ... or accept it ... or open their heart to receive it. The sad truth is ... we live in a broken world that is full of broken people ... people like you and me ... who long for such a blessing ... but who cannot claim it ... it is a blessing that often seems so far away. And yet ... it doesn't have to be ... it is there for all of us to receive ... Jesus received such a blessing one day in the River Jordan.

It wasn't some simple blessing like ... "Good luck in your new job!" No ... it was a blessing bestowed on Jesus by God the Father ... a blessing from the Holy Spirit who descended upon the head of Jesus like a dove ... filling Christ with all the grace, love and compassion he would need in his ministry in this world ... it was blessing that he came to share with all of us.

Listen now to our Gospel reading from the third chapter of Matthew, verses 13-17. I will be reading from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*, because I believe his translation of the 17th verse is so powerful ... so right on target in the meaning of those words. Out of respect for our Savior, those who are able, please stand for the reading.

13 Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan River from Galilee. He wanted John to baptize him.

14 John objected, "I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not you!"

15 But Jesus insisted. "Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." So John did it.

16 The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God's Spirit – it looked like a dove – descending and landing on him.

17 And along with the Spirit, a voice: "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life."

This is the Word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

At the heart of much of the pain and suffering we endure in this world throughout our lives ... you will find broken relationships ... wounds that we carry with us through the years ... wounds that shape the way we treat other people ... wounds that impact how we raise our children ... how we treat our friends ... or how we love our spouse ... in fact, these wounds we carry affect every single relationship we will ever hold dear in our lives ... including our relationship with God.

Our broken relationships hurt ... and continue to hurt us. Some of you here were physically abused as children ... and those scars of that abuse are still very real in your life ... though you probably keep them carefully hidden away ... suppressed. Some of you were emotionally abused as children or as adults ... told by your parents or your spouse over and over that you weren't good enough ... or you were too fat ... or you weren't smart enough ... some of you may have even heard those awful words yelled out at you in anger ... "I wish you hadn't even been born" ... those words literally burned a hole in your soul.

Even loving relationships between friends, spouses, with your children ... all have times of pain ... it always happens. But sometimes, however, that pain can break a relationship. And for some of you, it's too hard of a struggle to rebuild a relationship because someone rejected you ... or turned away from you ... maybe that person used to be a dear friend and they deeply hurt you in some way.

Maybe one day ... out of the blue ... totally unexpected ... you walked into your home and your husband or wife just flat out told you ... "I don't want to be married to you anymore." The pain of rejection almost destroyed you then ... and it still hurts today. You swear you'll never go through that again. And for the rest of your life you try to overcome or forget that pain by being good enough ... maybe you do everything in your power to please someone ... to make someone love you ... be it your spouse or your children ... or your parents ... or just a good friend ... to feel some sense of that allusive peace of mind that always seems just a breath away ... but your sense of self-worth keeps pulling you back down ... your low self-esteem ... prevents you from living a life free from the baggage of your past.

Broken relationships hurt. It's hard to trust someone when you've been hurt ... it's even hard to trust God.

So how can I feel, you might wonder, like one of God's chosen ... when I've been told over and

over by people who should have loved me ... "I don't want you around. I don't want you to be here. Why don't you go away?" After a while ... you begin to lose touch with any reality that says you are chosen ... that you are beloved. It just doesn't sink in. So when you sit here in church and the pastor is preaching a sermon about God blessing you ... pouring out unconditional grace and love into your life ... about a God who loves you no matter what ... it might seem a bit unreal to you.

Oh sure ... in my head I can accept that Jesus Christ loves me ... after all, I'm a Christian ... but do I really feel it deep in my heart? After all, loving relationships have been too painful. I can't risk loving someone else ... even God.

Every week ... here at this font ... we proclaim these words ... "Remember your baptism and keep it holy." But I sometimes wonder ... what do those words really mean in our lives? As we just heard in our Gospel reading, as Jesus came up out of the waters of the Jordan ... God proclaimed ... "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life."

How many of you have longed to hear those kind of words spoken to you? How many of you would love to hear those words spoken to you today? Do you even realize that those same words in which God blesses Jesus Christ ... are also meant for you, too?

If you don't hear anything else this morning ... then hear this ... hold on to these words ... God is telling you ... "You are my Son ... You are my daughter ... I have chosen you and marked you by my love; you are a delight of my life." Did you hear those words ... if not ... please listen again ... "You are my Son ... You are my daughter ... I have chosen you and marked you by my love; you are a delight of my life."

Henri Nouwen was adamant about us hearing those words ... he believed with all of his heart that the words God spoke at the moment of baptism of Jesus Christ ... were meant for all of God's children ...

Listen to what Nouwen writes: "I want you to hear that voice, too. It is a very important voice that says, "You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter. I love you with an everlasting love. I have molded you together in the depths of the earth. I have knitted you in your mother's womb. I've written your name in the palm of my hand and I hold you safe in the shade of my embrace. I hold you. You belong to Me and I belong to you. You are safe where I am. Don't be afraid. Trust that you are the beloved. That is who you truly are."(Henri Nouwen, "The Life of the Beloved")

There is no question about it ... the pain of any broken relationship in your life is real ... whether it happened way back in your childhood ... or something happened to you just last week ... there is real grief, sorrow and suffering. And that is one of the powerful reasons Jesus Christ came into our broken and sinful world ... to show us how to live through such pain and misery ... to reconcile us to God ... to remind us that we are never alone or forgotten or rejected ... and to show us that through the very gift of his life ... we truly are blessed and loved in the eyes of God and nothing will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. It is through Jesus Christ that our brokenness can be healed ... it is through Jesus Christ that we can begin to

rebuild our lives in a new way ... for Christ tells us that we can tightly hold on to his hand as we face the truth of our past and begin to let go of whatever it is that prevents us from being who God desires us to be today and tomorrow.

Still having a hard time with it? Many of us do. And the fact is, I don't know how long it will take you to accept this wonderful gift that Jesus Christ offers you. Because coming to grips with old wounds ... with pain and suffering ... doesn't happen overnight ... it's a journey ... sometimes a lifelong journey ... but it is a journey you don't have to take by yourself.

In a community of faith such as ours ... we are called to remind each other that we are unique in the eyes of God ... that we are loved by God ... and that God's love is unconditional ... with absolutely no strings attached. We are called to stand with each other ... to support each other ... we are called to remind each other of those powerful words of God ... words that are spoken to all of us ... "You are my Son ... You are my daughter ... I have chosen you and marked you by my love; you are a delight of my life."

Every single one of us needs to hear those words spoken to us ... not just once ... but often ... so whether you already have a deep assurance in your heart that God loves you and blesses you ... or whether you aren't sure if anyone loves you, even Jesus Christ ... then I invite you now ... to come forward and be reminded of God's promise to you this day and every day ... because we can never hear it enough . . .

And remember ... there is absolutely nothing in this world ... nothing ... that can separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

As you come forward to receive your blessing ... take one of the small stones out of the baptismal font as a reminder to carry with you ... that God has chosen you ... and marked you with love ... and you are a delight in the Lord's eyes.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.