

There is a meme going around social media right now that says, "How cool is it that the same God that created mountains and oceans and galaxies looked at you and thought the world needed one of you, too?" I love that. The idea that God was uniquely inspired to create each one of us, and poof, here we are. It's a humbling thought, and so very awesome!

So often when I think of creation and my responsibility toward it in theological terms, I think of how I am to love our environment and other people as a reflection of how I love God. Rarely, however, do I stop to consider the enormity of God's love for me that precedes my ability to love others. God's love for each one of us blossomed long before any of us were even conceived. Amazing.

And when I consider that God's time is not linear like ours, that God is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, and knew our story with all our ups and downs and successes and failures at the very same moment that God was inspired to imagine each of us, and God created us and loved us anyway?!? ... And that love has been a perfect love from the beginning of time, despite our imperfect attempts in our brief little lifetime to be in relationship with God or anyone else. Doesn't that blow your mind?!?

A moment ago, we heard Luke's brief recounting of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River by John, in the company of a throng of other faithful children of God. Jesus' unique relationship with God and with the community of the faithful is not simply proclaimed but defined. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

At baptisms in the Episcopal Church, the officiant refers to the person about to be baptized by their 'Christian' name. One's identity is proclaimed to the community of faith no less than three times: that person is presented by name, baptized by name, and anointed by name. Invoking someone's name signifies relationship and honors personhood. And from baptism forward, the community recognizes what God has known all along – that this person is a beloved child of God. **God knows us intimately, and we are invited through baptism to know and be known by our community.**

When we enter sacramental relationship through baptism, we accept God's invitation to more fully experience God, ourselves and one another. The miracle of God's invitation is that it's not a quid pro quo of any sort: we don't have to give or do or be anything in order to receive blessing from God. Because we were blessed before we were conceived. We were beloved before we were born. Baptized or not, we are all made in the image of God, we are all children of God, and we are all beloved of God.

Put simply, baptism into the life and death of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit is the sacrament through which the community of faith joins together to recognize and honor an individual's pre-existing state of belovedness.

Jesus was beloved before he entered the Jordan River. And Jesus was beloved as he drip-dried and prayed on its banks. But his voluntary entry into the waters marked his acceptance of God's invitation to live out his relationship with God and God's people in a particular way. His baptism was the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace which he allowed to define his life. And his death.

God imagined us way back at the very beginning. The fruit of God's imagination was so beautiful, so amazing, so compelling that we now are here – in this moment, in this place. To varying degrees, we have each responded to God's invitation to relationship. Baptized or not, we have come here seeking direction for how to live out *our* relationship with God and God's people in our own unique and particular way.

I've been thinking these last weeks about Presiding Bishop Curry's Way of Love. If you've not yet seen it, it's a cycle of seven actions that Christians can use in their spiritual formation and practice: turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go, rest. It's been a great tool for me personally, but it's also broadened my thinking about the kinds of actions I pour myself into. What do I engage in; what actions would be most helpful in meeting the needs of the world; what do I need to focus my energy on in any given moment to be most productive for God's kingdom?

In my preparation this week, I stumbled on a Mennonite blog where the author said the following: "God's love for us is an endless string of verbs: creating, providing, sustaining, protecting, nurturing, blessing. Though they sometimes become ordinary parts of life, it is our cherished honor and gift to receive God's love." The

author points out, “to *know* ourselves as loved is a verb. **Believing in our own belovedness** is a holy activity.”¹

I can’t help but wonder how our world might be shaken up in the best kind of ways if we put our energy into recognizing, valuing, and believing in our own belovedness and that of others. How might our community be re-formed if our everyday interactions were intentionally framed in a context of mutual belovedness? How might we be better stewards of our brief time in this life if we told just one person each day, “the world is a better place simply because you exist in it?”

Those of us who have been baptized are called to live out our relationships with others in ways that root them in unconditional love and support and belovedness without expectation of having to give or do or be anything in return – in the same way that God blesses us simply because we are. If we embodied this kind of acceptance and love and generosity of spirit, how might those who do not yet know God be affected by knowing us in this way?

I’m going to take a page from Father Furman’s playbook and assign some homework. Your homework this week is to two-fold. Once each day, look yourself in the mirror and tell yourself that you are God’s beloved. It’s okay if you feel foolish doing it – it’s an outlandish statement to make, to be sure! But it is true nonetheless. You **are** God’s beloved. Second, go tell someone this week that **they** are God’s beloved. Do it in word or deed ... or go crazy and let them know in both word and deed. Let someone know how truly valued and appreciated they are – by you and by God.

Jesus’ baptism some 2000 years ago was an invitation to us – in our own day – to plunge deeper into relationship with God. As we follow in Jesus’ footsteps and go the Way of the Cross, may we accept the challenge to respect the dignity of *every* human being by recognizing ourselves and all whom we encounter as God’s beloveds.

¹ Adapted from <https://themennonite.org/world-needed-one/>