

Baptism of the Lord - January 12, 2025

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

“You Are My Beloved Child”

1. My mom had had enough of our bickering.
 - a. My little brother and I are three years apart and fought often when we were little.
 - i. I guess the age difference and just plain old sibling rivalry fed conflicts
 - ii. To hear mom tell it, we were constantly at each other’s throats.
 - iii. I don’t quite remember it being that bad.
 - iv. But then again, maybe being the older brother I thought I wasn’t doing anything wrong?
 - b. Mom wanted nothing better than for us to play in peace and get along.
 - i. I checked with one of my older sisters on this.
 - ii. The two of them are about 2 years apart.
 - iii. And they too had their strong conflicts
 - c. Anyway, my brother and I refused to get along, I don’t know why.
 - d. Mom tried everything she knew to get us to stop
 - e. One day, at her wits end, mom got physical (yeah she spanked on occasion, but this time it was different).
 - i. To put it more accurately, she made us get physical
 - ii. She made us kneel on the bare floor facing each other, our noses no more than a few inches apart
 - iii. She said something like “you’ll stay there until you’re able to hug each other and say you’re sorry” (notice that she was avoiding the whole litigation of who started what...)
 - iv. The aggrieved party would not give in. The offending party would not give in.
 - v. We probably made faces at each other, playing with fire since mom was supervising this creative penance
 - vi. And so we knelt there for what seemed like hours, until the absurdity of the moment got to us.
 1. What were we doing there?
 2. Whatever had been the source of the fight evaporated as we couldn’t help but laugh (at each other? at the world?)
 - vii. But mom was in no mood. While she preferred that we laughed instead of fight, she wasn’t done with us.
 1. OK, she said. Now hug your brother.
 2. Maybe it was that the laughter had thawed the situation, or maybe our knees were starting to hurt
 3. The point is that we did it, we hugged.
 4. And all was forgiven and forgotten... until of course the next time
2. In today’s gospel passage, John the Baptizer, as it turns out, had also had enough of the conflict he was witnessing all around him
 - a. Called by God, John went out into the desert and preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins

- b. John's preaching was harsh, and he was hard with those who came to him, calling some of them vipers but still guided them towards expressing repentance and feeling forgiveness
- c. The Gospel makes it sound like crowds were heading out there to the desert to see John
- d. There was such a buzz, people were coming from near and far to be baptized
- e. And, because people were seeing their relationship with God in a new light, they began to wonder if John could actually be the Messiah God had sent for them
- f. Nope, not me, John replies.
- g. One who is more powerful than I is coming...
- h. I baptize you with water. And he? He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
- i. And then John goes on to talk about Jesus' work – in farming terms
 - i. saying that Jesus will be able to separate the ones who would get with the program from the ones who would not
 - ii. and the consequences were going to be serious.
- j. Enter Jesus.
- k. In a clipped narrative, we hear Jesus comes to John and he gets baptized by John, along with all other in the crowd.
- l. Now you're not alone if you're sitting there pondering why exactly Jesus would be baptized.
 - i. It seems odd that John would agree to baptize his superior
 - ii. And also odd that Jesus feels a need to be baptized even though he wasn't doing the terrible things others were having to repent from
 - iii. While I don't have a good answer, in another gospel Jesus answers this question by saying it was necessary to "fulfill all righteousness" – so that all of God's expectations for righteousness were tended to
 - iv. What I would like to suggest additionally is that Jesus being baptized by John gave God the public opportunity to recognize Jesus as God's beloved child, to claim him as such, if you would.
 - v. The voice from heaven said: You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased.
 - vi. For Jesus to undergo baptism, and for God to claim him as God's own beloved child, I would argue is then stretched to mean that God claims each one of those being baptized as beloved children.
 - vii. And if so, then all of those gathered were being called out to be each other's beloved siblings.
- m. And that makes sense, since all the things which John was asking the people to repent from were interpersonal conflicts and disobedience to God's realm, behaviors which demanded reconciliation.
 - i. John was saying to those curious folks flocking to him: You! Why did you come here! I know your type... and you're up to no good! Go out and bear fruits worthy of repentance.
 - ii. To which the baptized crowd answered: "But then what should we do?"

1. Ok, says John to those still dripping from their baptism in the waters of the Jordan river: Make reconciliation real and lasting. If you have possessions, be generous and share them.
 2. If you have misused your power, don't take advantage of people
 3. John was speaking to regular people who were caught up in systems that pressured them into sinful behavior, like being tax collector cheating people or soldier abusing their power.
 - iii. He was telling them it is more important to be right with God and with one another, than to benefit by cheating or taking advantage of people.
 - n. John wasn't just saying that baptism was for them to get right with God, but that this baptism was also a crucial first step towards reconciliation with those whom they had wronged, and those in need whom they had ignored.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/jesus-baptism/commentary-on-luke-31-22-4>
 - o. And Jesus being baptized then represents the embodiment of that reconciliation
 - i. here is the teacher touched by the Spirit and claimed by God from above:
 - ii. here is the teacher who will now make it possible for all to seek and finally find reconciliation.
3. Baptism, the sacrament which we practice as Christians, shares roots with John's baptism, and is a similar kind of first step towards reconciliation with God and with one another
- a. Over the centuries, our baptism has been connected with important theological meanings
 - i. It signifies that God has forgiven our sins, washing us with cleansing waters
 - ii. It signifies that we have been renewed, participating spiritually in the death and resurrection of Jesus
 - iii. And it signifies that we have been welcomed by God into the family, called and claimed as God's own Beloved children
 - b. Christian baptism is the sign of God's love and grace, something which God does on God's own, not dependent upon how good we are or are not
 - i. To be sure, in the Bible people would ask to be baptized by the early church when they recognized their spiritual need and God's love for them
 - ii. But it wasn't an accomplishment or a reward. It was still God's gift, not something earned by holy behavior.
 - iii. Which is why in our Presbyterian tradition, we baptize children even before they are able to express their faith, not too differently from the way the Jewish people viewed circumcision, namely that the child is born into the covenant, into the family of God, and is loved by God (and their family) even before they're aware
 - c. With all that said, what may be important to highlight, then, is that Christian baptism, like John's baptism, is pointing us in the recognition that we need reconciliation with one another
 - d. If we are beloved children of God, then my neighbor is then also our sibling
 - e. And no, I'm not going to ask people in conflict to kneel in front of one another until they forgive each other
 - f. But I will say that, as John did, God is demanding reconciliation, and just behavior, caring about those around us, whom have been hurt by our action or our inaction

4. We are God's beloved children, and thus siblings one to another. And that of course means seeking reconciliation. Just like mom said.

Reflection questions

1. Share a story when you experience sibling rivalry, or some conflict with someone very close to you. Were you able to reach reconciliation?
2. The passage for Sunday (Luke 3:15-17, 21-22) is preceded by the harsh words and demands John the Baptizer had for those seeking baptism in the Jordan (Luke 3:1-14). What do you make of John's message to them?
3. In our community, what enables and what obstructs reconciliation in times of conflict?