

## “Beloved”

by Ellen Williams Hensle | January 12, 2025

All baptisms are special, but there's something about an adult baptism, perhaps because in the Presbyterian Church we do them pretty infrequently. A few years ago I had the joy of baptizing an adult who had recently become part of the congregation I served in Texas. He had been raised Catholic, though he had not engaged in church for most of his adult life. But upon marrying a member of our congregation, he began attending regularly and participating in the life of the community. We wanted to make him a deacon, but to be a deacon you have to be a member, and in order to become a member, you need to be baptized. He agreed, and we set a date to get some water on his head.

When the time came, I had him kneel next to the baptismal font so it would be easier to get the water from the font onto his head. With misty eyes and a heart full of gratitude, I looked down at him and said, “Matthew, child of God, child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, you are marked as Christ's own forever.” Then I went to give him a hand to get back on his feet – and he looked up at me and said, “Is that it?”

That wasn't it for Jesus at *his* baptism. At Jesus's baptism, the heavens opened and a dove descended and a voice could be heard declaring Jesus to be God's beloved Son.

Each of the gospels records Jesus's baptism, but the details differ slightly depending on the point each gospel writer is trying to make. Luke is clearly concerned to shift the narrative focus of his story, away from John the Baptist with his wilderness preaching and baptizing and onto Jesus as God's promised savior. John has clearly been the subject of messianic speculation. So Luke records John telling the people in his own words that the one to come is more powerful than he. And while the other gospels say that John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, Luke simply tells us that Jesus was baptized, along with others. John's role in baptizing Jesus is downplayed, even erased. Luke wants to make clear that Jesus is God's chosen one and the center of the story going forward.

Luke is also the only writer to give us the detail that after his baptism, Jesus was praying. It is in the context of this moment of prayer that the Spirit descends and the voice comes from heaven: “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Luke wants to establish prayer as an important aspect of Jesus's ministry. At pivotal moments throughout this gospel, whether Jesus is calling his disciples or preparing for his arrest and crucifixion, Luke tells us that Jesus prays.

And in the case of his baptism, when he prays, he hears God's voice affirming his identity as beloved Son. Once again Luke is a little cagey about the details: does everyone hear this voice from heaven, or just Jesus? Certainly the message is addressed *to* Jesus: *you* are my beloved Son. But perhaps this quiet moment of reflection, of pausing to open himself to God in prayer, creates the space in which Jesus can experience both the bodily form of the Spirit descending like a dove and the sound of God's voice confirming his belovedness.

When was the last time you paused to bask in your belovedness? For that is what we all are: God's beloved children. God's declaration at Jesus's baptism that he is the Son, the beloved, serves to confirm Jesus's identity as the Messiah. Though none of us is the messiah, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, each one of us can hear God speaking these words to us: you are my beloved child. As our Old Testament passage for today reminds us: God created each and every one of us. God has called each of us by name. We belong to God and God is with us, through every trial and tribulation, through every difficulty life can throw at us. God loves us, each of us individually and all of us together. We are precious to God, honored and precious and beloved. How often do we really pause to take that in?

That is part of what we are doing when we baptize someone, whether adult or child – we are pausing to marvel at the wideness of God's mercy and the mystery of God's grace, that we are included in God's family as beloved children.

In our Presbyterian tradition, we say that our sacraments, baptism and communion, are visible signs of invisible grace: they help us to make tangible the intangible; they help us to see and hear and smell and touch and taste God's goodness. Of course the enormity of God's love for us cannot be contained in a bowl of water at baptism or a piece of bread at communion.

But these real-world elements give us something we can, quite literally, hold on to. They give us a way to connect the mysterious truths of our faith with the concrete realities of our world. The moment of baptism, a few drops of water on the human forehead – this simple action seals and confirms and makes visible something that is already true, that the person who is being baptized is a beloved child of God, saved from sin by Jesus Christ and included in the community of his followers, the church.

You are beloved. We are beloved. Take a deep breath and let that sink in. [Pause.]

What difference does it make that we are beloved of God? To be beloved means that every human life has meaning and value – yes, even yours. When we are struggling with our purpose in life, when we are feeling worthless or hopeless, we can pause to hear God’s voice speaking to us, “you are a beloved child of God.”

Now I want to be clear, remembering that you are a beloved child of God is not a cure for depression or other mental illness. Too many people have been hurt by churches insisting that if people just *believed* harder they wouldn’t be depressed anymore. But while believing and trusting that we are beloved children of God is not a cure for what ails us, it is a resource for living, a starting place for exploring identity and purpose. It is a way to ground ourselves in a reality that is more real than the lies our depression or anxiety or any other force or person may tell us about who we are. At our core, we are beloved children of God.

And if we are beloved children of God who did nothing to earn or deserve that status, then we have to believe that every other person we encounter is a beloved child of God as well. And that in turn changes how we live in the world. As Christians, we walk through the world seeing others not as enemies or threats or less than, but as fellow beloved children, as members of our expansive, God-given family, as neighbors. If I am a beloved child of God, then you are as well. What choice do I have but to treat you like it?

I must confess, Jimmy Carter has always been a bit mystifying to me. He was president recently enough that we never got to his administration in any of my US history classes. But it was also long enough ago that it’s not within living memory for me. Perils of being a millennial, I guess. So the exploration of Carter’s legacy after his death and through his funeral this week caught my attention. In particular I was moved by the eulogy given by his grandson Jason, chair of the board of the Carter Center, the organization that continues the Carter family’s humanitarian work.

Jason spoke of the Carter Center’s efforts to eradicate guinea worm disease, caused by a parasite that lives in stagnant water. The World Health Organization states that guinea worm disease affects “rural, deprived, and isolated communities who depend mainly on open stagnant surface water sources such as ponds for drinking water.” While infection is rarely fatal, the disease can debilitate the infected for weeks or months at a time.

In his eulogy, Jason Carter explained, “the thing that’s remarkable is that this disease is not eliminated with medicine. It’s eliminated essentially by neighbors talking to neighbors about how to collect water in the poorest and most marginalized villages in the world. And those neighbors were truly my grandfather’s partners for the last 40 years... When he saw a tiny, 600-person village that everybody else thinks of as poor, he recognized it. That’s where he was from. And he never saw it as a place to send pity. It was always a place to find partnership and power, and a place to carry out that commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Essentially, he eradicated a disease with love and respect.”

Ok, and maybe the help of money and modern communication. But what an example of the transformative power of real partnership: working together as equals toward a common goal. And what an example of Christ-like love: believing that every other person on earth is a beloved child of God, a neighbor worthy of a healthy life, and dedicating time and resources accordingly.

I am a beloved child of God. You are a beloved child of God. Together with all our fellow human beings, we are God’s beloved children. Let’s start acting like it.