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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Belovedness

Luke 3:15-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

When I was a student, I had a contentious relationship with a leader of the congregation where I worked. Make no mistake, I was young, strong-willed, a bit hot-headed. I was a straight-A student, so clearly I "knew my stuff," or at least, I wanted to believe I did. And this leader, well, I think he wanted to put me in my place. And, while I'm not sure I didn't deserve to have a slice of humble pie, this leader's behavior was...mean-spirited. I was only there a few hours a week, but it was enough time to create a real conflict. I struggled because here I was, learning to be a pastor, my first time in a leadership role in a congregation, and I thought we'd all just get along, that there wouldn't be any conflict or contention in a congregation. Things got steadily worse. And then one day, someone found him, passed out drunk in his car at a gas station. The truth often flies at us at a hundred miles an hour – the truth that fights and struggles with other people are seldom what they seem; there is always more to the story. A few Sundays later, I was assisting with Communion. The blood of Christ shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. The blood of Christ shed for you. The blood of Christ...And there he was. And here I was with the means of grace. And when I communed him, the one who received grace upon grace was me. Because this was a Beloved child of God. We are all called children of God, all Beloved, and this is a comfort and it is a call to transformation.

John was baptizing people at the River Jordan, he admits straight up that something is lacking in his baptism, he's got water, but something more is on its way. When Jesus finally arrives at the river, the something more is finally revealed. So, at the River Jordan

that day, baptism is changed. Martin Luther says that “baptism is not simply plain water. Instead it is water used according to God’s command and connected with God’s word.” Our theology of the Trinity teaches that God is, basically, a relationship. A mysterious relationship – not like a mystery that needs Sherlock Holmes to crack the case, but a mystery – something that we reach to understand, but never fully grasp. So, when God, the Father, the first person of the Trinity, breaks into the story with a word to Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. And that word is that Jesus—God-in-human-flesh—is beloved...that message of belovedness weaves us into a mystery where all that we are is taken up into God’s self. All—the whole of human experience—is woven into God’s very self.

St. Clare of Assisi founded an order of nuns that stands as a complement to Franciscan monks. They’re called the Poor Clares in her honor to this day, and most take vows of poverty. St. Clare once said, “We become what we love and who we love shapes what we become.”

Just as Jesus takes on our shape and form, becoming what God loves, we, too, are obliged to become like the God we love. St. Clare said, “Imitation is not a literal mimicking of Christ, rather it means becoming the image of the beloved, an image disclosed through transformation. This mean we are become vessels of God’s compassionate love for others.”

The very nature of being a Beloved of God is no get out of jail free card. Being the Beloved of God will not free us from pain or keep us from hurting. Being the Beloved of God does not keep bombs from dropping, wildfires from engulfing homes, and tornadoes from flattening warehouses with the workforce inside. Being the Beloved of God will not spare us from the worst we deal each other, the cruel twists of fate. Because the one for whom the heavens were rent asunder is the one who will cry out from the cross, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

When Thomas Aquinas takes on the topic of friends he writes, “in the love of friendship, the lover is in the beloved inasmuch as he reckons what is good or evil to his friend as being so to himself; and his friend’s will as his own, so that it seems as though he felt the good of suffering evil in the person of his friend.” The nature of friendship—of Belovedness—is such that I feel what you feel; what harms you harms me; I am lifted by your triumphs. This is the reality that God assumes in the person of Jesus. And that makes sacred and holy the be-loved-ness we feel for one another.

We are then left with the truth that our belovedness is assured not because we are regularly graced with the glimpse of heaven through torn-open skies, but because we know God in the beloved bodies and experiences of one another, and, when we consider the cross, we know God especially through those who suffer.

Once, I read that when Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached, he always called his congregation *beloved*. St. John uses in his gospel, and in the three tiny letters that come near the close of the New Testament. Beloved. It is the word that rings from the voice of God when Jesus is baptized, the word the Church has preserved as spoken over each of us in our baptisms. Beloved.

It is a great circle, humans were made in the likeness of God, and in God's ultimate embracing of humanity, God takes on the likeness of humankind that as beloved children of God, we might become like God, that we might be love—be God's love to others. It is a comfort, but also a call to bring others into this circle, into this dance.

Amen.