

**January 9, 2022**

**Beloved**

**Luke 3:15–17, 21–22**

*<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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.”*

*<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup> 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.”*

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

In a small church, mysterious visitor can cause quite a stir. She was about my age so some folks thought she was a friend of mine. I didn't know her. No one seemed to know her. Hap was the one to finally break the ice with her. He waited at the door for her and flung it wide open as she tried to sneak in. He welcomed her with his irresistible smile. Information as to her identity and story came in spurts and fits. The first time Hap greeted her, all he got was that her name was Chris and she lived in the apartments. The next week, we discovered she was working on her PHD. The next week we discovered that her family lived in Oregon and was not close in any way. People sincerely wondered why a young, single, attractive, student would live in a tiny town, where she didn't know anyone, 40 miles from where she went to school.

After several months, I finally beat her to the door. It was the first time I had ever spoken to her. I asked her if we could visit and was relieved when she was agreeable. We made plans to go for a walk later in the week. Her story unfolded as we walked the streets of Granger, Iowa. She was going through a horrible divorce. Her husband, a professor, beat her down verbally and played mind games with her. She had to leave a house she loved – and leave behind her beloved dog – and go to a different town to get away from his abuse. Her self-confidence was devastated. She was like a whipped pup – timid and cowering. Emotionally, she was barely surviving. Attending church was an act of desperation. She had never attended church in her life.

We walked together as much as her schedule allowed and I discovered that the reason she bolted from church was that she cried easily. She hated being such a mess. She hated the thought of people seeing her in the worst time of her life. She continued to come to church, and Hap continued to welcome her, and she started to look forward to that. And she started to smile - every now and then.

The thing I appreciated most about Chris is that she didn't have a clue about church or God. It was all new to her. She was eager to learn and we had great talks on our walks. A year and a half later, Chris courageously walked down the aisle to join the church and to say yes to pursuing the way of Jesus. It was a moving moment for all those who had

been paying attention her progress. People were hugging her and shaking her hand after church, and you could tell they were genuinely happy for her.

Next, she wanted to be baptized. It was October and she wanted to be baptized in a river. To honor her request, I scouted a suitable location on the Raccoon River. I wasn't sure how it would all work. The river was low and our only hope for a deep spot was under the bridge. By the time we got it organized, it was the last Sunday in October. It was raining. One family drove their motor home to the riverbank and had it toasty warm.

I'd like to say that the entire congregation drove the 11 miles to share in Chris's baptism, but it was more like 20 people. We stood under the bridge, sang a song, said a prayer, and ran into the river, and in the deepest part we could find I baptized her. We ran to the motor home, put on dry clothes, drank hot cocoa, and laughed. It was day I'll never forget.

The heavens didn't open, there was no dove or voice from above. But it was a transcendent moment. For the first time, in a long time, Chris felt special, loved, and welcomed; like maybe, life was worth living – dreams were worth pursuing. She recognized that everyone was there for her. Her soul felt its worth.

I am so very thankful that I had that experience early in my ministry...because there are a whole lot of people like Chris. And at any moment she might be tuning in or sitting in front of us.

We don't know the sorrows that people are carrying. We don't know what happened or why they feel defeated. We don't know who told them they were worthless or sinful. We don't know who might be barely hanging on. We don't know. Maybe its you. And because we don't know we should assume that everyone needs to know they are beloved. Everyone needs to be treated as beloved. And if you don't know it, let me say it right now, you are beloved. You are a beloved child of God.

You are not what you do.  
You are not what you've done.  
You are not what other's say you are.  
You are not what you have.  
All those things come and go.  
What will never change is your identity as a beloved child of God.  
Only then, will your soul feel its worth.

I'm still reading Father Boyle's book, "The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness." He writes: "Here is the Good News: The God we most deeply want IS the God we actually have, and the god we fear is, in fact, the partial God we've settled for. God looks at us and is ecstatic. This God loves the sound of our voices and thinks that all of us are a magnificent work of art. "You're here." God's cheek resting on ours."<sup>1</sup>

That's what God is doing in Jesus' baptism – tearing open the heavens to tell Jesus – you are my beloved! And the good news is that we are too! We always have been! It is a matter of knowing it for ourselves, and then treating others as beloved.

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<sup>1</sup> Father Gregory Boyle, "The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness," p. 9

Boyle tells the story of Gloria, a young woman who came to Homeboy Industries. Gloria recalled the first time she entered Homeboy. She was greeted by a senior staff member and Gloria marveled at her kindness. Gloria said, “She welcome me like she was waiting for me.” Later in the chapter, Boyle tells a story about the dream Gloria shared with him. In her dream she is dancing with God and folks, “more important...more valuable people, keep trying to cut in...and God won’t let them.”<sup>2</sup>

And her soul felt its worth.

This is our work! To know our worth in the eyes of God. And then to treat others with that same honor.

Many of you know that Desmond Tutu died on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December. When asked why he became an Anglican priest, Tutu told the following story to the BBC about the day that changed his life:

“One day, when Tutu was nine years old, he and his mother were walking down the sidewalk when a white man approached them. Before a young Tutu and his mother could step off the sidewalk the white man stepped off the sidewalk and, as they passed, he tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to her.

The white man was Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican priest who was bitterly opposed to apartheid. It changed Tutu’s life. When his mother told him that Trevor Huddleston had stepped off the sidewalk because he was a “man of God,” Tutu said he found his calling when his mother told him that he was an Anglican priest. Tutu decided there and then that he wanted to be an Anglican priest too. He wanted to be a man of God,” said Tutu. Huddleston later became a mentor to Desmond Tutu and his commitment to the equality of all human beings due to their creation in God’s image, was a key driver in Tutu’s opposition to apartheid.”<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes, we are the ones who need to step off the sidewalk. I can remember Desmond Tutu preaching at our General Assembly in 1993. He said, “When we greet one another we should genuflect, as if to say, the God in me, greets the God in you.”

Today, wherever you are, whatever condition you are in, you are God’s beloved. The God in me honors the God in you.

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<sup>2</sup> Boyle, p. 10

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-12-26-the-dauntless-priest-whose-humanity-ignited-the-courage-of-a-boy-who-would-become-archbishop-tutu/>, <https://www.leadlikejesus.com/blog/step-sidewalk>