

January 11, 2015
Falcon Heights Church, UCC
Falcon Heights, MN
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Baptism of Jesus
Genesis 1:1-5
Mark 1:4-11

GOD'S BELOVED

I have heard it said that each time we come to worship, we come as a different person. We come with a slightly changed self-awareness and a somewhat shifted view of the world. This week, I find I come to worship with a deepened sense of gratefulness for this congregation, and the care and prayers many of you have extended to my family with my husband's recent surgery and my foot injury. I come with a stronger belief in free speech and of journalistic freedom, following the murders of French political journalists. "What does my Christian faith have to say about such darkness?" I find myself asking. But I also bring my struggles about the limits of free speech, about the appropriateness of hate speech in our multi-cultural world. How would Jesus talk about those with whom he disagreed? This is why we need to gather in worship repeatedly, often. Each week, we will have a new and different need for forgiveness, or perhaps a surprising occurrence that we need to give thanks for, a closed part of our mind that needs gentle challenging and nudging open. Again and again, we come to worship needing to experience and know God's power to re-orient us, heal us, change us, bless us.

I wonder if Jesus headed to the River Jordan that day because he sensed something was different in him. Some new self-awareness bubbling up inside of him after years of working alongside his father as a carpenter? Some fresh realization of the injustices of the misuse of power and wealth? Perhaps a welling up of compassion for those under the crushing oppression of the Roman occupation and religious practices gone stale? John the Baptist invited fellow Jews of his day to step up and repent, to turn their life around and be baptized as a sign of God's forgiveness of their sins. We have no idea what suddenly pushed Jesus to join the crowd by the Jordan River. He suddenly emerges from an obscure youth and young adulthood, and aligning himself with a radical prophet who was already in trouble with the local authorities.

Later church doctrine will insist that Jesus was without sin. But did Jesus bring a sense of his own shortcomings, his own regrets and hesitations, up to that point? Could he have possibly have been feeling spiritually "dry" himself? Did he feel a desire to turn his life around, to quench some deeper thirst in those river waters? Jesus was apparently well read in Hebrew scripture; did this watery baptism experience weave with his recollection of the primal waters described in Genesis....God creating something new out of a void, a formless matter and a watery abyss? Did he sense the Spirit brooding over him, calling forth a new part of him, or a new way of being? "You are my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well

pleased,” the words came to him. How would the memory of this event resonate for him in the months and years to come? Here is someone who so clearly was able to convince other people of their essential worth and loveableness. In his baptism, Jesus experienced himself as being worthy, loved and intimately connected to God, as he heard the words from heaven: “This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.”

It seems only natural that Jesus would spent much of his ministry reminding other people that God found them worthy and beloved. Yet for all our talk about encouraging high self-esteem and feeling good about ourselves, many of us who seek to follow Jesus have a tough time with this concept. We seem to fall on one side of the fence of the other: We either underestimate our value and worth as a human being, or we overestimate it. We might constantly cut ourselves down and feel less than everyone else. Or we may move in a grandiose bubble where we are better than others, with little insight into our own fallibility, our limits, of where and how we might need to change. Oblivious to the fact that we might be dependent on others or on God.

Stories down through the ages are filled with characters that see themselves as unworthy, unredeemable and unlovable, contrasted with those who strut their supposedly power and perfection. The fictional character Jean Valjean has become familiar to many of us through movies and stage productions, even if we haven’t actually waded through Victor Hugo’s 19th century French novel *Les Misérables*. Here is someone who felt unredeemable to his core. I have always found the scene where Jean Valjean is released from prison to be particularly riveting. This lowly commoner had spent 19 years in the pre-Revolutionary French “galley,” as the prison colonies were called. He was ordered to serve 5 years for having broken a pane of storefront glass and stealing a loaf of bread. Added to this term were 14 more for 4 escape attempts. He was a tree-pruner who fell on hard times; but by the time he is released from prison, Valjean (John) has lost his connections with his previous life, and even his name. Now convict #24,601, he has self-protectively retreated within himself. “From year to year,” wrote Victor Hugo, “this soul had dried away slowly, but with fatal sureness. When the heart is dry, the eye is dry,” the author continued. “On his departure from the galley it had been 19 years since he had shed a tear.” “When the heart is dry, the eye is dry....”

Valjean’s dry heart is exposed early in the story, through yet another act of thievery just after he gets out of prison. The act appears congruent with the person he has become; someone possessed by a “dry heart.” Perhaps this sounds familiar: To be stuck with a heart that feels so dry, parched, and rigid that we can’t seem to change our self-perceptions or our actions.

In Victor Hugo’s story, Jean Valjean is newly released from prison, wandering in a daze, and finally stumbles upon the home of a kindly bishop and his sister. They generously offer him a meal and a place to sleep for the night, but Valjean decides to steal from them. Taking some silver candlesticks, he

escapes over the garden wall. The next morning he is caught, and dragged back to the Bishop's home by the police. When confronted with the thief, the Bishop slyly inquires of his sister: "Was that silver ours?" His sister is stupefied by his question. The Bishop continues: "I have for a long time detained that silver wrongfully. It belonged to the poor. Who was that man? A poor man, evidently." Speaking now to the policemen, the Bishop asks innocently: "And he told you that it had been given to him by a kind old fellow of a priest with whom he had passed the night? I see how the matter stands. And you have brought him back here? It is a mistake."

The police let him go. Jean Valjean is confused, and wary... "My friend," resumes the Bishop, "before you go, here are your candlesticks. Take them." Jean Valjean is totally bewildered. "Now," says the Bishop, "go in peace. By the way, when you return, my friend, it is not necessary to pass through the garden. You can always enter and depart through the street door. It is never fastened with anything but a latch, either by day or by night." The Bishop draws near to him, and says in a low voice: "And do not forget, never forget, that you have promised to use this money in becoming an honest man." Jean Valjean, who has no recollection of ever having promised anything, remains speechless. The Bishop continues in a grave whisper: "Jean Valjean, my brother, *you no longer belong to evil, but to good.* It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God."

"You no longer belong to evil, but to good." It takes many years for this reality to sink in for Hugo's character. How do we allow this message to really sink into us, as individuals and as a congregation? Another way to approach this question of self-understanding is to ask: To what or to whom do we each belong, ultimately? In early times, after a new follower of the Jesus Way was baptized, he or she would say, "I belong to the Lord Jesus Christ." This was a seditious statement at the time, and could get you arrested by the Roman authorities. It meant that your primary allegiance was not to Caesar, not even to your family or tribe. Followers knew themselves to be raised from their mistakes and false assumptions, their limited worldviews and clannishness, their passive acceptance of injustice. In the sacrament of baptism, they were raised into a belovedness as God's sons and daughters.

As your hands immerse in water this week, I invite you to remember your own baptism. Remember your baptism, even if you were an infant at that time, and that you are claimed as beloved by God. Try on these words this week: "I belong to the Lord Jesus Christ" as you go through your daily round, as many other forces seek to claim your allegiance. If you have never been baptized, perhaps consider this sacrament as an invitation to proclaim just whom you truly belong to. Let's talk together how this might be a public sign of where your allegiance truly lies at this point in your life. Ultimately, do we belong to the world....or to God?

The Good News is that we are accountable for but we don't belong to the

mistakes of our past. We do not belong to our failures nor do we belong to the wounds received from others. We belong to good because we belong to God. Besides all of us, who else in the community needs to hear this message? Absorbing this reality ourselves, and sharing it with others: this is the work of the church. We are God's beloved sons and daughters, initially created this way as humans and reborn into Christ through baptism. Thanks be to God. Amen.