

Sermon—Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22
January 13, 2019- Baptism of Jesus

When Andrea and I lived in Windsor, Ontario in the early nineteen nineties nobody thought anything of crossing the border. If you needed milk you went over the bridge or through the tunnel to Detroit and brought home a jug, no bags over there. Most of the time you were waved through by the guards, it was considered an inconvenience if they asked you to produce a birth certificate. Times have changed. This summer I received a notice to renew my health card; I had to bring in three separate pieces of identification. It seems we have to prove who we are in more and more places. Who are you and do you have the right credentials to prove it?

Scholars believe this was the question with which Luke was most concerned answering in today's scripture, who was this Jesus, where were his credentials? Luke goes to great length to establish Jesus as the messiah, the long awaited saviour of the Jewish people. He does this first by differentiating Jesus from John the Baptist. John says, "I'm just getting the way ready for him, I'm not even fit to untie his sandals." There is some thought that many people followed John in Luke's time and that there was a rivalry between both groups of followers. This is borne out today by the existence of an ancient sect in Iraq called the Mandaean, who reject Jesus and follow the teachings and perform the rituals of John the Baptist. Luke further establishes Jesus' credentials through the words of the blessing from heaven; "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." The words of this blessing are paraphrased from the description of God's servant in Isaiah 42.¹ Luke establishes Jesus' credentials by pointing his audience back to their own scripture. "Listen people", Luke says, "this Jesus is the real deal, he is the messiah, look at his credentials."

During our short lives the question that guides much of our behaviour is one of identity. It starts during our teenage years as we experiment with various identities. In our twenties we make decisions about careers and vocation. Later we might decide to become parents. We have mid-life crises where we look back at the blur of life and wonder, "how did I become this?" Retirement brings on all kinds of identity questions and as we get older we think about our legacy. Old age brings infirmity and we wonder, who am I if I can't do the things I used to do?

For most of us, to greater and lesser extents of course, if we look honestly at what we give our time and attention to, we live as if we are what we do, we are what others say about us and we are what we have. In other words: 'We are our success, we are our popularity, we are our power.'² These are our credentials; they are how we prove ourselves to the world. It can be awful burden though can't it, proving ourselves this way?

¹ Loader, <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkBaptismJ.htm>

²Henri Nouwen, source unknown.

What if we took that blessing that Luke has God give Jesus and give it to ourselves and one another? Do that, give yourself the blessing; “I am a beloved child of God, in whom God is well pleased.” Now do that for some people you know, insert their name in the blessing; “_____, you are a beloved son/daughter of God in whom God is well pleased.” It’s what baptism is all about, we acknowledge who we truly are, we are God’s children and baptism is our credential. In this sense we are no different than Jesus.

Over the last twenty to thirty years there has been a shift in how some people within the United Church of Canada and other denominations view Jesus. It used to be that we all thought Jesus’ uniqueness derived from the understanding that he was divine, the one and only literal son of God. If this is true for you, blessings to you. What matters in the life of faith is how you live your beliefs. There are lots of beautiful, faithful souls who hold to this view of Jesus and I respect them deeply. But, there is another school of thought, that opened up new possibilities for me in the life of faith. This school of thought holds that Jesus’ uniqueness comes from his willingness to embrace totally and completely what God intends every person to be. Jesus’ uniqueness is derived from him fully living into the image of God in which we are all created. Jesus isn’t so much a distinctive, unrepeatable icon of divinity but rather a model of what is possible for all of us when we embrace the divine image within us, when we embrace our identities as God’s beloved children. The implications of this belief are profound, no longer is Jesus simply an object of worship he is the hope for what all of us can be. Incarnation is possible in all of us; “we are all beloved sons and daughters of God, in whom God is well pleased.”

Wow! What if we actually lived from that belief? What if we held out our baptism as our true credential? What difference might that make in our lives and our world? What if we lived as if we had nothing to prove, that God had blessed us from the beginning with everything we needed to be who we were meant to be? Don’t you think there would be a lot less anxiety in our lives, a lot less worry about whether we were measuring up to standards of success, popularity, beauty and wealth? Don’t you think it would be easier to get along with others and to share what we have if we weren’t constantly pitting ourselves against others in the battle for resources and recognition? Easier said than done, right? Absolutely, I struggle with claiming this God-given, God-blessed identity all the time. There are so many forces aligned against us. There is so much fear. There are so many who benefit from our insecurities. That’s why being part of a faith community is so important, that’s why having a spiritual practice is so important. Both are consistent reminders that we have a deeper identity, an unshakeable, unassailable core that marks us as God’s beloved.

What the life of Jesus shows us is when you feel secure that you are a beloved child of God, when baptism is the credential that identifies you, you have nothing to prove in this life, and you can live life simply from a sense of gratitude. Your life is lived as a response to a gift, or as we say—grace. Because you have been so blessed you want to share the joy and the bounty of your life. Not only that, you want to share also because

you recognize that those around you are also children of God. You are part of a community of the beloved. This realization becomes the reason for and the source of your empathy. You are no different from a persecuted Rohingya in Myanmar, from Mark Zuckerberg or people who need shelters or food banks. This empathy becomes the basis for community, for there is nothing another can take or give to you that is more valuable or enduring than that original blessing; “You are my beloved child, in who I am well pleased.”

As Christians, baptism is our credential, an affirmation of the unshakeable core of who we are; God’s beloved. It’s a credential that can open up life’s richness to us, a credential that can take us beyond the surface illusions of wealth, popularity and power to the very depth of life, to a place of rest, a place where we know ourselves as beloved, as blessed, as children of God. There’s no need to prove yourself to anyone, that is good news.