

Sermon for 1-13-19
Scriptures -- Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
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Back in July of 2014, when I was still in seminary, I was offered a scholarship to attend the Proctor Institute for Religious Leaders hosted by the Children's Defense Fund in Clinton, Tennessee. It's an annual program, a week of intensive formation and inspiration for church leaders from all across the nation, with a focus on seeking justice for the least among us -- children living in poverty.

It was a wonderful experience, with lots of amazing preachers and teachers. My two favorites were a father and son team: the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr. and his son, the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III. Moss III is a young superstar preacher, theologian, and pastor of the 8000+ member Trinity United Church of Christ on Chicago's South Side. Moss Jr., the father, was a stalwart fixture in the Civil Rights movement, a close friend of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a leader in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and continues to be a prolific preacher, author, and activist. They're quite a team, as you can imagine!

Each of the Reverends Moss preached multiple rousing sermons during the week, but my favorite, and the highlight of the week for many of us participants, was when father and son preached together. They went back-and-forth for about 25 minutes. No manuscript, no notes, just two men and their Bibles, open to the Book of Isaiah.

I don't remember the specific reading. It could have been the one we heard today: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you... Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."ⁱ

What I remember clearly is the sense that I, and everyone else present, had witnessed something precious, and intimate, and holy. In the midst of their dynamic exposition of the Scripture, both father and son had become vessels of the Holy Spirit. It was obvious, plain as day to anyone who was lucky enough to witness it. And it seemed that the Spirit was blessing and anointing the son through the words of the father; and the son received that anointing with a posture of true humility and grace.

It was a beautiful moment; and it came to mind as I read the last words of today's Gospel reading from Luke: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."ⁱⁱ

There's something universal here, isn't there? Regardless of how we grew up, our different family dynamics, whether our parents were present or absent, loving or hurtful, whether it's simple or complicated... at some point in our lives, on some level, we all desire to hear words like these: *You are my son (or daughter), I love you, and I'm proud of you.* But of course, it doesn't happen for all of us; because we humans are imperfect, we're selfish, we make lots of mistakes, we forget how to love, we wound one another, and sometimes we run out of time.

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This story, Luke's version of Jesus's baptism, can be a bit confusing. First of all, it's so short! It's all of two verses, and the baptism itself is almost a non-event: "Now when all the people had been baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying..."ⁱⁱⁱ The interesting stuff comes afterwards.

And the big question, the real source of confusion, is **why did Jesus have to be baptized at all?** He's perfect, right? He's God Incarnate, the eternal Word made flesh, full Divinity in human form. He's without sin. He has no need to repent, no need to be cleansed -- so why baptism?

Why would Emmanuel, the Prince of Peace, the King of Kings, choose to lower himself, to undergo a sinner's baptism, alongside a bunch of regular folks with all their faults and foibles?

Well... what if that's exactly the point?

Luke doesn't say that Jesus **needed** to be baptized. But "all the people"^{iv} were being baptized, and so Jesus went, too. The tax collectors, and the soldiers, the seekers and the sinners, men and women, old and young -- they all went down to the Jordan, and Jesus went too. Jesus went to his cousin John, he waited his turn, Jesus was immersed in those same muddy waters where all the others laid down their burdens and found forgiveness and hope.

What did Christ find in those waters? Luke doesn't say.

But it's just afterwards, just after his baptism, while he's praying (maybe still standing in those waters), that "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.'"^v

Jesus has come down to the river, he's been immersed in baptismal waters. Even though he's without sin, even though he's the Word made flesh, he's humbled himself, submitted himself. **He has chosen, of his own free will, in all his divinity and glory, to be one of us;** to dwell with us, to be our neighbor, our brother, our friend.

His choice is an act of self-sacrificing love and solidarity. The royal King has chosen the life of a peasant. It's Christ's first choice in his earthly life to be one of us... but it won't be his last.

It is only after this momentous, miraculous, unfathomably selfless choice, that the voice from heaven speaks:

You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

There it is: the anointing, the good father's blessing, the proud parent's loving gift to the child who's done good.

He may not have chosen to be born, but he certainly chose this -- to be baptized as one of us, to live alongside us, to devote himself to us, to die as one of us, and to save us from the powers of evil and sin and death.

I wonder, in that moment, while he stood praying in the waters, was it the greatest desire of Christ's heart, to hear words of affirmation and love and delight from the One who sent him?

Maybe. None of us can know for sure. But we can be sure to make it the greatest desire of our hearts -- to live and speak and act with such generosity and compassion and selfless devotion that we, too, may someday hear words like these from our Maker:

You are my child, my beloved; and I am well pleased with you. **Amen.**

ⁱ Isaiah 43: 1-2, 4

ⁱⁱ Luke 3:22

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 3:21

^{iv} ibid

^v Luke 3:21-22