

Epiphany 1A 2017 Sermon: Feast of the Baptism of Jesus

Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

It was the late 1970's, and I was living in Austin, Texas, where I was attending seminary. I got a phone call one day from Sears, saying that my Sears credit card account had maxed out and was overdue. At first, I was not overly concerned, since I knew that I did not *have*, nor had I **ever** had, a Sears Credit Card. I told this to the man on the phone.

The problem is, he didn't believe me. "You are Mark Meyer, are you not?" "Yes." "And you live at such-and-such an address, do you not?" "Yes." "And this is your phone number, is it not?" "Yes, but I do not have, nor have I ever had, a Sears credit card." But rather than believing me, he got more and more belligerent, and began threatening me with legal action. I became panicky, since I'd never in my life been threatened with legal action. And there was something else that he made me feel that I had never experienced before: This person *saw* me – and *treated* me – as a liar and a criminal. And it was a **horrible** feeling to have that identity projected onto me, to be seen as – and treated like – a liar, a cheat, a thief.

It was a case of mistaken identity, but it shook me to the core, and I have used my middle initial ever since, lest I be mistaken again for some other Mark Meyer, and again be seen as, and treated as, a liar and a thief.

So: Who gets to name us? To tell us who we *really* are?

In today's Gospel we read of Jesus' baptism, when he was named and identified by his heavenly Father: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Now I side with those mainline Bible scholars who do not believe that Jesus came from the womb with a full awareness of his identity. Like every other human being, Jesus had to come into his own; he "grew in wisdom and stature," to use Luke's words. (Luke 2:52) This heavenly naming of Jesus at his baptism as "the Beloved," therefore, is not simply for the sake of the crowd, but for Jesus' sake, also. In both Mark's and Luke's Gospels, in fact, the voice from heaven speaks

directly to Jesus, “**You** are my Beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.” (Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22) In **those** two Gospels, we’re not sure whether the crowd heard these heavenly words or not – only that Jesus heard them. And while it is true that in Matthew’s account of the baptism the heavenly voice speaks to the *crowd*, Matthew clearly states that the heavens were opened **to Jesus** and *Jesus* was the one who saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. One scholar notes that in ancient “Hellenistic cultures a lover might convey his [or her] feelings to a beloved by giving him or her a dove.”¹ The opening of the heavens and the sending of the dove are for **Jesus’** sake, a direct expression of God’s love. “This is a personal experience for Jesus,” writes Fr. John Shea. “The heavens are being opened *for him* and *he saw* the Spirit of God.”²

But we would miss the implications of this story for our **own** lives if we understood it *only* as something that happened to Jesus. “On the one hand,” notes Fr. Shea, “Jesus is the unique Son of God, irreplaceable and beyond imitation. On the other hand, Christians **participate** in the identity of Jesus Christ, continuing his presence on earth and imitating his way of life... The descending dove and the speaking sky that combine to communicate love and mission to Jesus are passed along *through* Jesus to **all** his followers. The ultimate communication of the story of Jesus is for his *followers* to see and hear what **he** saw and heard as he came up out of the waters of the Jordan... Jesus’ baptism has awakened him to his ultimate identity as the beloved one. Now his mission is to awaken others to **their** ultimate identity as beloved ones.”³

But I wonder how successful Jesus has been? Is that **really** how we see ourselves – as Beloved sons and daughters of God, first and foremost? or do we in reality look for, and find, our identity from our society? Like me being labelled a “liar and a thief” by that Sears bill collector, and being shaken to the core by that naming, do we accept the identities that others lay upon us as our “true” identities? It is so easy to do!

Professor David Lose writes, “We are at a time and place where so many would like to identify and define us by many, many names: Democrat or Republican, conservative or liberal, American or foreigner, gay or straight, rich or poor, Black or White, and the list goes on.”⁴ At our Adult Forum today, we watched a Muslim scholar, a woman who wears a hijab, a head scarf, give a TED Talk titled, “What do you think when you look at me?”⁵ What **DO** we think? What identity **do** we project onto a woman wearing a head scarf? Dr. Lose continues: “[W]e are also and increasingly named and defined by the **products** we use or stores at which we shop. Nike, Apple, BMW, Tiffany, Hallmark – these are not just company names, but lend a particular sense of self, and increasingly the brand labels on our shirts, shoes, cars, and computers convey a great deal of our identity.”⁶ Research has recently shown that in our increasingly secular society, more and more people are finding their sense of self-worth not as coming from God, but rather as coming from some brand with which they identify. “Brands are a signal of self-worth,” writes one of these researchers. By identifying with a

brand, “We’re signaling to others that we care about ourselves and that we feel good about ourselves and that we matter in this world... It’s more than ‘I’m hip or cool,’” [one of the researchers states]: “[It’s] ‘I’m a worthwhile person, and I matter, and you should respect me and think that I’m a good person, *because I’ve got the D&G on my glasses.*’”⁷

Is it any wonder, then, that in the recent Presidential election Clinton supporters and Trump supporters sometimes came to blows? Their very sense of worth and personal identity was tied up in their candidate – their “brand!”

So let’s be honest with *ourselves*: Do you and I allow our identity or worth, even in a small degree, to be named by something or someone outside our own soul? Do we find even a *little* sense of our worth in our Apple iPhone or because we are Bronco fans or Episcopalians or supporters of Trump or Hillary or Bernie, or because we have a college degree or have 1000 Facebook friends or go to church every Sunday, or read the Bible 5 times a day, have never gotten into trouble with the law, or whatever else outside ourselves we might hold up as proof that we have worth?

Or, do we take the Gospel stories of Jesus’ baptism to heart, and realize that the only *true* source of worth that any of us can ultimately rely on is our worth in the eyes of God? *That*, after all, is the only identity we will carry beyond the grave. At our baptism – and even **before** our baptism, at our *conception* – God said, “You are my son, my daughter, my Beloved.” *That*, my friends, is your identity, my identity, first and foremost. Before I am a priest, a middle class white American male, a White Sox fan, a Christian, whatever, I am God’s beloved child, and all other identities fade in the light of that **primary** identity and worthiness.

And that is true for every person on the face of this earth: **each** is a beloved child of God. And our recognizing that is what is meant by “loving our neighbor as ourself.”

My friends, however aware Jesus was of his identity **before** his baptism, it is clear that the opening of the heavens to him at his baptism, the descent of the dove upon him, and the voice from the heavens awakened him all the more to his identity as God’s Beloved Son. And his mission in life was “to awaken others to **their** ultimate identity as beloved ones [of God].”⁸ Fr. Shea writes: “Zacchaeus came to see and love in himself what Jesus saw and loved in him... Peter came to see and love in himself what Jesus saw and loved in him, and [Mary] Magdalene came to see and love in herself what Jesus saw and loved in her. Jesus sees the ‘child of God’ (see John 1:12 and 1 John 3:1) in people with such clarity and persistence that **they** begin to see it in themselves...”

“...Awakening to love is essentially an interpersonal chain,” Fr. Shea continues. “The awakened Jesus awakens others, and then those awaken still others...”

Evangelization happens when awakened people awaken others to their ‘child of God’ identity...

“People **are** beloved children of God. There is no need to *make* them children of God. The task is for them to **realize** this truth of their identity.”⁹

But you and I know that this is easier said than done. We first have to believe it in ourselves: That we do not have worth because we wear Calvin Klein underwear or drive a certain kind of car. We don’t have worth because **our** team won the Super Bowl or because we’ve never had to stand in line at a soup kitchen, or because we belong to this or that political party or go to church every Sunday (as commendable as that is). We have worth because we are beloved of God. Period.

And when we awaken to that truth and can believe it and claim it – which is partly what we do when we renew our baptismal vows today – we can then see and awaken it in others. And I don’t have to tell you how desperately so many people in our world today need to be awakened to their God-worthiness, their identity as Beloved of God!

I see it almost every day. The down-on-their luck person who, for whatever reason, needs help for her children, but is embarrassed that she has to ask for help, thinking that she is somehow not worth as much as someone like me who has had every advantage in the world laid in my lap. People of a different skin color or religion or nationality or ethnic group have picked up the subliminal (or overt) message that they are second-class citizens in these predominantly Christian, predominantly white United States of America. The high school student who struggles to make passing grades or didn’t make the football team or can’t find a date to the Prom or doesn’t have a car or a cell phone thinks that this somehow means they are of little worth. The ex-con who can’t find a job because of his past, the homeless persons living under the bridge here in Canon City, the rich person who believes his worth is in his wealth – all desperately need to have awakened in them what Jesus had awakened in him and in turn has been awakened in you and me: that God opens the heavens for us and sends down his Spirit upon us and calls us, “Beloved.”

AMEN

¹ John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 51

² *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 52

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/baptism-of-our-lord-a-family-name/>

⁵ https://www.ted.com/talks/dalia_mogahed_what_do_you_think_when_you_look_at_me

⁶ Lose, *ibid.*

- 7 <https://today.duke.edu/2010/09/brandreligion.html>
- 8 Shea, p. 52
- 9 Shea, pp. 52-53