

Matthew 3:13-17

Then 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."

Early on in my relationship with Gaye I had to buy a book of etiquette. It was a defensive measure. Now, I readily admit that I was raised in a culture and a household that did not *dwell*, shall we say, upon social graces whereas Gaye was raised to have lunch with the Queen.

I had the basics - No slurping or burping; wait until most people have their food before starting to eat (although I did find in one etiquette book a small exception that when there are more than 6 or 8 people but I never saved the reference so ...)

Anyway, I remember that after a few months of receiving *feedback* - looks that could cut through steel - about some things it occurred to me, "Hey wait a minute! I wonder if those rules being cited are actually true. Maybe she's just making them up. I'm so ignorant I'm a sitting duck!" So off to Munroe's I went. Do you know some of those etiquette books are huge, they are thicker than the Bible!

Over the years we have worked it out although I still mess up on the salt and pepper thing – "If asked for the salt or pepper, pass both together, even if a table mate asks for only one of them." You asked for the salt, I passed you the salt. And the other one, - "Never intercept a pass. Snagging a roll out of the breadbasket when it is en route to someone else is a no-no." Still seems an opportunity missed to me, but ...

I continue to work at it because it seems to be important to her and I would not want her to be disappointed in me or feel that I did not respect her love; and, in the end, it helps me be a more considerate person, which is not a bad thing.

The grandchildren have a lot more flexibility although, even with them, I overhear the phrase "We don't do this at Grandma and Papa's house." Really! The Grandma Code or, more accurately, the Grandma ethic.

Part of the power of how Gaye deals with our grandchildren comes from the fact that they know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she, from the core of her being, thinks they are just fabulous, full of wonder, special, beloved. And that if *Grandma* is saying this it must not be because she is mean or grumpy (like some others) but because it really is good for them, even though they may want something different in the moment. Grandma will always rush to the door saying, "You're here, you're here, my special ones are here. I am so happy you came. *Now*, let's take our shoes

off, hang up our jackets and go and see what things we can discover.” At the core, they are the Beloved, with whom she is well pleased – and they know it. (See Mommy, Grandma loves me!) They know the rock upon which they stand.

The story of the baptism of Jesus is one of the few stories that is told in all three Gospels, although each writer uses it in slightly different ways. The story is important because, in a real way, it is foundational for us as Christians. Jesus is the One recognized and certified by the Creator as the One, the Beloved. And we’re with him. The Spirit that descended upon him is the same One – though it comes later in the book of stories – that is given to us.

When all the other stuff is stripped away, when someone – God, St. Peter, the guy digging the trench around our house - asks, Who are you and what are you about? In essence, we say “We’re with him.” We’re with Jesus. It’s that simple even though some of the traditional language can make it feel difficult.

For many of us, the doctrines of salvation that grew up in the early church are remote. The liturgical language of sacrifice and blood is a foreign language to us and so all that stuff about Jesus dying for our sins, “through his blood we are saved,” really doesn’t resonate with us because liturgical sacrifice, as a means to connect with God, to converse with God, is not our language. At day’s end, what we say is simply “I’m with him.” We’re with the One called Beloved, the One who knows in their depth what it is to please the Creator of all that is. We are that and we strive to be that.

Gaye is not ignorant about the failings and dispositions of our grandchildren. More than once our conversations have ended with, “Oh yeah, she’s going to be a challenge” but all those things are not the lens through which she sees them. “You’re here, my special ones are here. I am so happy you came.” God looks at us through the lens of Jesus. God sees us through he was and is – and that’s just a gift, no matter our failings, our dispositions, history, the state of our closet or our soul, even if we slurp, burp or forget the pepper.

And it just is. Step 1.

Since we live in a time whose thought patterns continue to be influenced by the Greeks, we may, at some point entertain questions like Are we beloved only because of Jesus or are we beloved in ourselves?

Such divisions and conversations come to our mind partly because of the neat Greek division of self as body, soul and spirit, questions of what we may be “in ourselves” (ontologically) versus who we might be “in relationship.” And they are interesting and important questions because, like most theological questions, they impact life.

But Matthew, whose story reaches out to us this morning, was not concerned about those distinctions.

Matthew tells the story for basically a simple reason.

Matthew's audience was a series of small house churches that lived during times of dramatic and potentially chaotic change. His view of the world was apocalyptic in the sense that he very much believed that the old order, which had held sway for so long, was now being displaced by a new reality, which he called the kingdom of God, and this displacement would alter the very structure of life, not just some of the technical or surface details. In some ways, the social and theological context of Matthew was very much like our own. The question that these people called Christians were emailing and phoning Matthew about was well then "in this rapidly changing and confusing time how then shall we be, how then shall we live?" Matthew builds his response upon this story of the baptism of Jesus.

Step 1 – Jesus is designated by the creator of all that is as Beloved; we/they are gifted with that same Spirit. And the story builds from there. Wondering how one who is beloved by God should live? Here, let me tell you the story of the **temptation** in the wilderness – a story of power, privilege and priority; wondering about the kind of character the Beloved exhibit here, listen to these words (which we call the Beatitudes, blessed are ... etc.). So, for you who hang out with him and who seek to be like him – aka disciples – then this is how you/we should be, this is how you/we should live.

How will people know who you are and what you stand for in chaotic, uncertain times? Not as the result of some philosophical or theological argument but by how you live, how you behave, how you conduct yourself. Such is the response of Matthew. And this is as true for us as individuals as for a congregation or a church. For is it not most often the crucible of chaos or change that reveals certain things and pushes us on what kind of person we shall be during this time of Conflict, divorce, financial pressure, family pain?

The entire field of Christian ethics has grown up as an attempt to answer that question emailed to Matthew – how then shall we live if we hang out with the Christ? And there are many answers and issues. I would not try and pretend with you that it is clear or simple.

I do find it interesting though that, in the last couple of decades, the matter of character has stormed to the forefront of discussion and "the literature," as they say. Like Matthew, in times of great change and uncertainty, matters of character come to the fore. We see it also in business. Many of the leadership books now are filled with what could properly be called matters of character and relationship as opposed to the earlier ones listing surefire techniques for sales, profit or management.

It is where we are – and so the call comes afresh and with challenge to we who hang out with the Christ.

Even though we stand in a long tradition, each incarnation of the church has to engage that question for themselves. As The United Church of Canada part of our current struggle is that we have forgotten our answer or at least have not yet formulated a response which inspires. In the face of this new world and emerging social order who is The United Church of Canada?

Many congregations are closer, as we are here. Even as we remain open to other voices we know which way we lean on many things, even public things.

The matter of homelessness, for example, we are very aware that this is really a complicated issue that involves policy at many levels, there are many stakeholders and yet, at the end, we say, quite simply that, as Christians, we cannot pretend the homeless do not exist and they are worthy of care and attention. Our Place is but one of our responses as a congregation; I suspect we might be on the verge of doing more but I don't know.

One of the United Church's historic strengths has been to engage the world as it is. We try not to pretend that women should only stay in the kitchen or that people of different sexual orientations do not exist or that people think differently about God. So, **here**, we do not pretend people sitting on the streets downtown do not exist. We may not have quarters but we have a "hello." We do not pretend that just because people get older their worth diminishes, that just because they no longer have a business card or they now live in a care home or their mobility diminishes they are less than Beloved. We do not pretend that addiction and mental health issues are not epidemic in our society. We may have no easy social policy answer but, in this house, this house of God, we do not pretend they/we who struggle with such do not count.

In Roman times, it was the right of the man of the house to use his children and those of the slaves however he wanted. One of the things most noted about the early Christians was that they took and cared for the children neglected or abandoned. Oh yeah, and they also believed some other stuff...

The early Christians did not abandon the old, the widowed, the sick by the roadside. It is not who we are. And the list goes on.

In the line of the Christian family in which the United Church stands we also valued not only the doing but the thinking – and the training of thoughtful minds and disciples.

Have you noticed how we are again doing it here with the children. When Gaye tells us one of the Godly Play stories she ends with wondering questions: which part of the story spoke to you; I wonder which part of the story might be left out? Godly Play – and the room upstairs that is

being renovated for it – is but one of the tools we use not only to tell the details of a story but to train a peculiar kind of disciple, a Beloved one who thinks about and wrestles with our stories and tradition.

Because in our house, in God's house, God's family we stand for certain things. We have practices we do – and are rediscovering – that are not just polite or keep us from offending –but which we engage because we want to be and to become a certain type of people.

We may forget to pass the pepper but we may not forget those with whom God has concern. We practice and live not to avoid the evil eye or the laser glare but because we want to experience life at its fullest, as we believe Jesus did, and we want to be worthy of being Beloved, our gift and our call.

These are my Beloved with whom I am well pleased.

Prayers of the people

Our God we give you thanks that you see us and greet us as your beloved children, no matter the state of our day, our health, finances, our relationships. Thank you for the warmth of your welcoming arms.

Thanks too for not giving up on us, for expecting us to live towards that to which we were created. Many of us too easily measure ourselves by what we have time for, or what is good enough or ... whatever but you continue to call us towards our best selves, even now, even today. Thank you for that – and for the opportunities to do that.

We pray this morning for the people in the state of Arizona, those affected by the shooting and what that will mean for any climate or civility or respect.

We pray for our country and province. We sort of understand all the complexities of governing but we ask simply – and will work towards ensuring – that those to whom you pay special attention are not lost – children, those without resources, whether elderly, young, addicted, ill or outside of some other category.

And we pray for ourselves, our congregation. We are faced with so many opportunities to live up to being your people. May we be wise, even shrewd, or at least strategic about our resources. Not so much that we may be known but so we may truly live up to what you expect of your people.

For ourselves and individually – we ask for courage, humility, vision and the gifts and skills that will carry us forward as boldly as you dream.

God, some of us come this morning with lots of stuff on our hearts, some buzzes in our mind, some we have pushed back into the closet. In silence, we now bring those things out and make you aware.

Our God, too often we feel like our prayers stammer. But much of what we pray for ourselves and for your world, is gathered the prayer Jesus taught, so it is with him we pray