

With whom I am well pleased
Jubilee Mennonite Church
January 28, 2018

Purpose: To recollect the love of God to each one of us.

Message: As people of the kingdom, we are welcomed into the kingdom with open arms as a sign of God's loving acceptance of us.

Scripture: Mark 1:4-13 [I will read]; Hebrews 3:1-6

Synopsis: Often we can feel that church and faith is as much about what we do as much as what we are about. We have a long line of obligations—of stewardship, volunteerism, making church work and doing the work of Church. All of this is part of our call to be responsible people who want to live our faith out in life. But we also need to be reminded from time to time of the context in which we do this—in the warm embrace of a loving and welcoming God.

Mark 1:4-13

⁴ John the baptizer
appeared in the wilderness,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance
for the forgiveness of sins.

⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside
and all the people of Jerusalem
were going out to him,
and were baptized by him in the river Jordan,
confessing their sins.

⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair,
with a leather belt around his waist,
and he ate locusts and wild honey.

⁷ He proclaimed,
"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me;
I am not worthy to stoop down
and untie the thong of his sandals.
⁸ I have baptized you with water;
but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee
and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water,
he saw the heavens torn apart
and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

¹¹ And a voice came from heaven,
"You are my Son, the Beloved;
with you I am well pleased."

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days,
tempted by Satan;
and he was with the wild beasts;
and the angels waited on him.

Any structure has a clear idea of who does what, or should be. Spoken or not, explicit or understood, we have a flow chart of who is in charge, what the responsibilities of those involved are, taking on our respective roles as appropriate. We all have a job description for each area of our lives prescribing who does what, when, and to what end. And this is a big deal, standing as it does right at the intersection of power, responsibility, personality, and just needing to get things accomplished for the good of all. In our households, there is the core list; if I cook, perhaps the people who eat with me clean up. We have a notion by in large of who buys the groceries, who pays the bills and does the laundry. It is sensitive territory. In our relationships, we don't tend to engage the stuff that bugs us, our feelings or our fears—that's not what drives our arguments. Instead, it is failures to DO things that often carry the freight for the bigger issues that lie underneath. When we fail to do, or assume that someone will do something and does not—that's what we argue about. It may well be *about* how we feel, or what we are afraid of, and all the rest, but we use the stuff we do to carry the rest of agenda. What we do in our relationships of all shapes and sizes, for good or ill, often determines how we are able to function within them.

Our spiritual lives are not that different. We often approach our relationship with the holy with yet another list of tasks which are ours to do. Discipleship means doing stuff after all. We need to pray, sing, worship, read the bible, participate in committees, do good works, and generally keep our nose clean for our spiritual selves to be in good order, often creating a list of things we should and ought to do that can be as demanding as any job description we carry. We Anabaptists are especially insistent about this because we so closely associate what one does with what one is as a matter of character. When we fail these myriad tasks, we can often end up feeling as though we have mired our selves into failure of those spiritual tasks that are ours, and in our minds we might have God clucking a tongue while looking at a celestial chore chart. We have our jobs; our duties. We need to hold up our end of the bargain, tending our responsibilities in the here and now.

That has been the deal with religion from the very beginning. You have a god out there set up to look after things—the crops, fertility, love, success, what have you. The work of the mortal is to do the things that keep the god happy, throwing in some special favors in order to get special favors. Despite the fact that our theology says that the world doesn't work this way, many

times we behave in exactly this way within our relationship with the God of the universe. God, we hold, is creator and CEO and has the responsibilities to keep things under control and we have the job of worshiping and sweating it out here on the factory floor. But we know that when it comes to the incarnation, the organizational flow chart was turned on its head, once and for all. God comes and is with us, and crosses the boundaries, and enters into our world fully and completely. God comes and is present in the mud with us, working with us, along side us and is present to us and that has a way of complicating matters.

I think we understand our world in this way with God way up there, and us down here because it makes much better sense. We have our broken world, our broken lives on one hand and a God whose holiness knows no bounds, whose otherness is beyond our comprehension on the other, and there is just no comparison. God comes to us and wants to be present to us, and often we make excuses: 'No Lord,' we say, 'we cannot receive you like this. We fail at our chores. We do not live up to our responsibilities. We are not faithful enough, not clean enough, not holy enough for you to come and participate in the symbols of our rebirth, our cleansing. We just aren't worthy of your presence, your love.' We know too well that the waters are not clean. We grieve that our world, in so many ways which both make headlines and go unmentioned, remains its broken self, despite our better efforts to change it, our better efforts to ignore the facts that congregate around us.

But here's the thing. No matter how quick we are to demure, or how much we protest, God in Christ comes and is with us. Is present to us. And that does not change. In Mark's terse "just the facts. Mam" version of the story, we don't get a whole lot of John's message to work with. Just that the time for repentance has arrived and one was coming for whom he was not worthy to engage. When Jesus does appear on the scene, there isn't the arguments over being qualified to baptize or not, just Jesus being baptized and conferred with this fundamental blessing: "This is my son, the beloved, in him I am well pleased." Hardly words of prosecution and accusation, asking how this mess came into being. Mark is recounting what John already realized; that Jesus was God in our midst, that this beloved son had waded into our midst, and is with us in the most supreme act of love the world has ever known. It is in this act of love, this breaking down of the barriers and speaking of the beloved child that the statement becomes about much more than just

who Jesus is and what he is supposed to do. It is a launching of Jesus into who he is to be from that moment on. With a confirmation and calling like that, there is little wonder that Jesus needed to head right out into the desert to make sense of it all.

By wading into our circumstances in the form of the beloved son, God is also speaking to us. We do not have the voices of the cloud at our baptism, or within our life—not typically in any case—but the voice is speaking all the same; “You-- you are my child, my beloved. In you I am well pleased.” [repeat to sections]. In coming into our circumstances, ALL of our circumstances, we encounter the love of God, we are blessed by God and in God. And we can forget that. We can forget that this is what this is all about, this body, this building, this existence is all about, is the very of love of the living God who comes into our messy, messed up world and calls us beloved, who offers all that God is, all that God has in order to be with us, come what may. We can forget that our baptism of love which is with each and every one of us from our very first breath, until our last is an unalienable and uncompromised reality for us. We can forget that what we do to reflect that love, to expand that love, and to live that love in our world is not about responsibility, qualifying for God’s favours.. It is not about our needing to do the things that the Lord requires of us in order to be worthy. Rather, we must do what we do because when we remember this baptism, when we remember this love come to us in human form and into human circumstances, we can do no other but respond in loving action and faithful witness ourselves. It is Christ in us that calls us to respond with the love of Christ around us. How would it change our understandings of the world if we could but remember the symbol of baptism is not so much one of belonging, and theological propriety, but rather a reminder of the great Love of the one who loved us from the very first, and a confirmation of servanthood in response to that love? Is that something we could celebrate? Is that something we could really rally behind?

I am not saying that doing things is unimportant. We must be about prayer, devotion, and service. These are the means by which we grow in love and transmit love. It is my dream that we each might have such a keen sense of our belovedness that we would each be always finding new ways to love. We have responsibility to live out our lives as the Christians we proclaim ourselves to be, to grow in knowledge, devotion, and service. But that responsibility is not one of pleasing God. God is pleased with us. We must remember this. Ours is a responsibility of

responding to the love that God has shown for us, remembering, and reflecting that love with all we meet and all that we do. All else is misplaced pride and un-productive guilt.

Martin Luther, the reformer spent many lonely years. He was ostracized and suspected of every crime in the book. He spent many lonely months hiding in the Wartburg castle, anxious over what came next or whether the authorities would finally fulfill the threats they had levied against him. In those months, the stories go, he wrote over and over again 'I am baptized' to remind himself of who he was and to whom he belonged.

My message to you this morning is simple; remember that you too are baptized in the love of God with us in all things, and all circumstances, regardless of whether you have had the public symbol or no. You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.' With words such as these, how can we but love in response? May we be given ears to hear this most important of messages, even over the muddy currents of our world rushing around us.