

*Based on \*Genesis 1:1-2 and Matthew 3:13-17. Creation and Re-creation*

*\*Liturgical Reading Below*

A few years into pastoral ministry, a mentor of mine checked in to see how things were going.

This job is crazy-making, I said. Some Sundays I show up with a carefully crafted exegesis of the biblical text and a truly inspired translation from the ancient languages, and the people respond with glazed eyes and blank stares. Other Sundays I show up run-down from the realities of life as just another woman on the journey who happened to slap a stole across her shoulders, and I tell them God loves them, and they think I am the most amazing pastor they have ever met.

To which my mentor said, Exactly. Your job is to tell them God loves them. Everything else is commentary.

It seems too simple, having spent all that money on all that education, but the truth is there *is* something deeply wounded within our psyche that needs to be healed by the love of God. Something within us that screams we are not worthy of love - God's love or human love - *unless ...!*

We have to earn it somehow, with good grades in school or achievements in our profession or the work we do for the church or how hard we try to keep our families together. Or maybe it is our morality that earns us the love we so desperately crave, if we are brave or courageous in the face of injustice, if we are faithful in our marriages, if we beat back our addictions, if we walk the straight and narrow. Or maybe if we are just pretty enough or smart enough or athletic enough or *whatever* enough, we can finally earn enough love from God and others to bind up that psychic wound forever and ever amen.

Even the Dalai Lama has reckoned with whatever it is that may or may not be unique to our culture that tells us from such an early age we are not worthy of love. In his early encounters with the West, the Dalai Lama was asked what wisdom he would offer to those of us who feel a lack of worth. This great spiritual master had nothing to say, stunned by the question. Why in the world would anyone feel unworthy, asked at first. How could it be? Over time, however, he stopped asking that question, as he got to know us and wrestle firsthand with the inner demons that seem to swirl so desperately within us.

Even the story of Jesus and his baptism is subject to this question of worth. So often, in our culture, the breakthrough of the Spirit from the heavens declaring his belovedness is interpreted as proof that he has done the right thing through his faithfulness to the call of God and that maybe you and I can hope to be beloved if we are faithful, too.

That may in fact be the *right* reading of this lesson, but I want to offer a different one.

This fully human Jesus is a hillbilly from the sticks. A nobody of uncertain parentage from nowhereville Nazareth, put down by every possible economic and political oppression you can imagine. Here he comes, at the age of thirty, possibly in a midlife crisis, seeking something, *anything*, to turn the tide.

John, of course, sees Jesus differently. And isn't that the way things are with us, putting people we admire on pedestal after pedestal. The very ones who appear the most put together, the most polished, the most *spiritual* often being the ones who are the biggest wreck of all.

So Jesus plunges into the waters of grace, and lo and behold he finally hears to the core of his soul the sermon every one of us needs to hear, which is that the steadfast, never-failing, never quitting, always with us, passionate and compassionate love of God really is pleased with him, *no matter what*. And Jesus becomes so transformed by the blessing of his belovedness that he cannot help but spread the word. One person so radically transformed by the blessing of belovedness then goes on to change the world.

That is one way to read the story. Not the only one. Perhaps not the *right* one. But truly the one so many of us may need to hear today. Because that is our invitation, as well. To come to the font to reclaim the blessing of our own baptism, and the steadfast love of God that is here for us *no matter what*, and to share that blessing with all we meet.

Let the church say, Amen!

*\*Liturgical Reading of Genesis 1:1-2 and Matthew 3:13-17*

God began creating the heavens and the earth.

*Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.*

The earth was formlessness and emptiness.

*John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"*

A generative, womb-like darkness settled upon the face of Deep waters.

*Jesus answered John, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."*

From the generative darkness, a new creation dawned.

*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.*

A wind, breath, Spirit from God swooped over the face of the waters!

*And a voice from heaven said, "You are my Beloved Child; with whom I am well pleased."*