



## BELOVED

January 7, 2018, First Sunday after Epiphany, Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Mark 1:4-11

Rev. Rebekah McLeod Hutto, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

---

*God who watches over us, offering us grace and hope, be with us this day as we hear again the story of Jesus' baptism. Help us to remember your healing, your cleansing, and your claiming love for each of us as we remember our baptisms. May the waters be for us an image of hope and renewal as your Word nourishes our lives. Bring us closer to you, loving God. Amen.*

Over the last 5 years a lot of developmental research has come out focusing on the negative role of shame in child rearing. It happens when, rather than disciplining a child for a bad decision, we shame them for their behavior through insults or criticism. The result is that these shaming methods leave children with a view of themselves as “bad” and “flawed” rather than actually motivating them to change their behavior. Children who are shamed change their view of themselves, not their decisions. Now, of course we want our children to know the difference between good and bad behavior, between good and bad choices. However, there is a difference between guilt and shame. Feeling guilty is knowing you did something wrong, feeling shame is believing you are inherently wrong. If a child feels guilt for a decision, but knows they are capable of more, they can change their behavior. But if they see themselves as inherently bad, they don't feel empowered to act differently. The latest research has revealed that methods of shame have left children and adults with such negative views of themselves that they can't distinguish bad behavior from bad people.

For too long, the Church focused on shame and fear as a way to teach the Gospel and lead people to Jesus. Think back to the Great Awakening and Jonathan



Edwards' sermon "Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God". Edwards said, "*God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire...*"<sup>1</sup> A message filled with shame and fear, right? Sadly, some corners of the Church still practice this dreadful teaching. But as research has shown, shame and fear are not great motivators for change. And in fact, I think this goes against the message of the Gospel. Jesus says, "*I have come that they may all have life and have it abundantly.*"<sup>2</sup> Jesus does not say: I have come so that they may have shame and guilt and fearfully come to believe in me."

The proof of this lies at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, the text Blue Belle read for us today. Jesus' public ministry begins with his baptism. In the River Jordan, with his cousin John the Baptist, Jesus goes down into the waters and rises, proclaimed as God's beloved. The skies are literally torn open, the dove descends, and God speaks.

There is a unique word that is only used twice within Mark's Gospel: at Jesus' baptism and during his death on the cross. It's the word for tear, *schizo* in the Greek, and it's a violent word. Here in today's text the heavens are violently torn open as God speaks about the beloved Jesus in the waters. At Jesus' death, the temple curtain is violently torn in two as the dividing wall between God and humanity is destroyed. Tearing open is how God speaks in Mark. It's how God communicates that something holy, something sacred is on the loose. In fact, that God is on the loose. Today, in Jesus' baptism, when the heavens are torn open, God speaks and we all hear: "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*"<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD, Rev. Jonathan Edwards, Preached at Enfield, July 8th, 1741, [https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/edwards\\_jonathan/sermons/sinners.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/edwards_jonathan/sermons/sinners.cfm)

<sup>2</sup> John 10:10.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 4:11.



The *Beloved*. It's not a word we hear spoken too often. A word much more common in the 1800s than now, it means someone who is dearly loved and cherished, close to the heart and valued more than any other. When God calls Jesus Beloved, it's a reminder that this is God's Son, the one whom God loves, the one whom God sent to love us. Jesus is Beloved, cherished more than any other. Jesus' ministry begins with words of God's love—a declaration that Jesus is God's Son.

But if God is truly on the loose in Mark, then Jesus isn't the only one whom God calls beloved. Remember, the heavens are ripped apart; God is tearing open the scene in front of us. Grammatically, in the Greek, this tearing open is an ongoing action, one that doesn't have a definite end. As Jesus enters our world, becoming fully a part of it in his baptism, God is fully in our midst, showering love upon each of us. Therefore, in this scene God tears open our reality, renaming each of us Beloved.

You are beloved. You heard these words this morning as you came forward to remember your baptism. In baptism we are claimed and welcomed as God's children, and today we remember we each are *a beloved child of God*. Baptism is a welcome, a cleansing, and a renewal, and today we remember that gift. But be honest... how often have you thought of yourself as God's beloved?

Think back to the research I mentioned earlier. Growth and maturity do not come from shame and fear. In fact growth and maturity, whether in children or adults, come from knowing you are loved, you are safe, and you are worthy. That's exactly what Jesus shows us in this story today. We are Beloved, we are cherished, we are God's children, able to love as God loves.

This last November I attended a conference in Texas with 30 other Presbyterian clergy from around the country. Each morning and night we worshipped together, led by the staff of the conference; the musicians played guitars, mandolins, and sang in beautiful harmony. One night they held a Taizé service. While this style of worship has morphed into many forms, Taizé is traditionally monastic, and its primary focus is prayer and meditative music. Our Taizé worship involved mostly singing, interspersed with scripture and prayer. The liturgist for the evening was



the administrative head of the team, a middle-aged woman from southern Virginia who was our “momma” of the conference, managing our travel, lodging, schedules and other administrative details. She was the perfect person to lead worship that evening, because her voice spoke as only a momma’s voice could. As worship came to an end that night, in her final benediction, she spoke the words, “Remember, you are a beloved child of God, go in peace.” Tears welled up in my eyes as she said those words because I thought to myself: *Wow, I really believe it when she says it.* Maybe it was the comfort of her soothing Southern accent, maybe it was because she had been caring for each of us all week long, or maybe it was God herself speaking. Either way, I believed it.

Friends, imagine what could happen if we truly believed the words: *You are a beloved child of God.* For a second, imagine the growth possible if you believed—not just knew, because belief is stronger than knowledge—that you are beloved. When you believe you are beloved, old insecurities fade away. You begin to treat yourself as carefully as God would—because you are worthy of great love. When you believe you are beloved you have the courage to act in ways you couldn’t previously imagine, because you know you are gifted and precious. Finally, when you see yourself as beloved, love pours out from your heart to others. You reject the voices of those who do not speak with words of love and instead offer the same gracious compassion you’ve been given. You are beloved...and that changes everything.

Moreover, don’t forget that God is continuing to tear open our reality. God calls you beloved and tears up any other unloving name you’ve been given, any other hurtful name someone else has called you. God tears up any other shameful name that you’ve given yourself as well. Friends, God tears up our insecurities; God tears up our mistakes; God tears up the judgments, criticisms and shame. By coming into our world and calling us beloved, washing us clean in the waters of Baptism, God gives us a new name, a beloved identity.

In closing this morning I want to leave you with a poem from pastor Jan Richardson<sup>4</sup>:

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2015/01/06/baptism-of-jesus-beginning-with-beloved/>



*Beloved.*

*Is there any other word needs saying,  
any other blessing could compare  
with this name, this knowing?*

*Beloved.*

*Comes like a mercy  
to the ear that has never heard it.  
Comes like a river  
to the body that has never seen such grace.*

*Beloved.*

*Comes holy to the heart  
aching to be new.  
Comes healing to the soul  
wanting to begin again.*

*Beloved.*

*Keep saying it  
and though it may sound strange at first,  
watch how it becomes part of you,  
how it becomes you,  
as if you never could have known yourself anything else,  
as if you could ever have been other than this:*

*Beloved.*

*In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*