

# St James United Church

Message for January 15, 2023

Baptism of Jesus Sunday (Second Sunday after Epiphany)



“Called Beloved” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: 1 Cor. 1:1-9; Mat. 3:13-17; “I Felt the Current Take Me” by Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi

Beloved. A couple of weeks ago, I invited those gathered for worship to sit for a few moments to appreciate the power of being called by that name. James referred to the recipients of his letter as beloved, as did John, and Paul, and Peter, and the anonymous author of the Letter to the Hebrews. Clearly it was a meaningful honourific in the early Christian community. Today we hear why, Jesus claimed as beloved when he emerged from the water. It’s a powerful naming. So once again I invite you to sit with it and claim the name for yourself. You are God’s beloved daughter, God’s beloved son, God’s beloved child. *(pause in quiet for a few moments)*

How did it feel? Did you believe it of yourself? It’s not easy, easier perhaps to see yourself as the beloved of a person, a spouse, parent, child, grandparent, grandchild, friend. But beloved of God? I struggle to see myself as God’s beloved. It feels presumptuous, despite how every author of an epistle uses the term, despite how Jesus repeatedly told his disciples he loved them, God loved them, that they shared in the same love that he shared with God.

There are a number of reasons for this, but one I believe lies in my reaction to the follow up statement God makes of Jesus, not just that Jesus was beloved, but God found happiness in him, was pleased in him. It feels underwhelming, doesn’t it? I think, this is Jesus, so how can God just be pleased? Don’t you know what he’s going to do? And that’s the issue. God named Jesus beloved just for showing up. Not for anything he did, not for what came later, not miracles, or powerful sermons, or the cross. God rejoiced in him simply as him. I’m too used to the idea that congratulations are contingent. This is how the world speaks, says we’re good, loveable, worthy based on how we look, how much we make, where we went to school, how successful we are. But like Jesus, God names us beloved just for being us.

Paul drew on this principle in his opening words to the Corinthians, affirming everything that they were in God’s grace, what they shared in Christ. It’s surprising given the later content of his letter, words of challenge more than congratulations. And yet that is the point. Paul didn’t give up on them because they were struggling to treat one another as they should. He trusted that they could draw on the grace they experienced as God’s beloved. That’s the core message of the story I shared in our Learning Together time, our task to encourage each other in spiritual growth, to remind one another that we are in fact God’s beloved. Despite this, we more often judge how we are doing as a faith community based on how many people are at worship, how many kids are in Sunday School, how many new people are coming, how many baptisms we celebrated. We use metrics based on assumptions of growth, assess our success on what we do, not what God does. We forget to just celebrate being in community, our task to make sure people, both within these walls and beyond them, feel that they are truly loved.

I wonder if we avoid our main task because we are unsure if we can trust that we are beloved ourselves, let alone encourage it in others. The source of that doubt is twofold. The first comes from just being alive. Despite the best efforts of our parents, we all end up with wounds in our hearts, left feeling less than loved. One of my earliest memories is of my mom telling me that when I was born I looked like a wee, drowned rat. I know now from my sister that she actually told me I was undersized and so she felt very protective of me. But all I heard was that I wasn't the perfect baby she wanted. When she died, I linked the two experiences, feeling that she died because I hadn't measured up. As a result, I fear rejection. I've worked on overcoming this but in times of stress I'm there again. When I am, my main task is to love that little boy, acknowledge his feelings of fear but not judge him, or deny his feelings. Otherwise, I just push the fear deeper in me. And it still shows up, and often in a much more hurtful way. We each have a little one in us. Perhaps they are jealous, angry, acquisitive or fear rejection too. Our job is to love them through it rather than judge their feeling, to love them rather than judge them.

This brings me to the second source, our doubt reinforced by the church which sadly has made judgement our theological go to rather than love. We see this especially in how we interpret the cross, Jesus as a sinless victim to save us who are completely depraved, inclined to sin if it were not for grace. This focus has had a hurtful impact. I still remember when I lived on a reserve. One woman came to see me every week for confession. She was so overwhelmed by shame she ended up having panic attacks. Judging this way isn't even scripturally faithful. If Jesus was perfect, why did he ask John for baptism? We end up denying Jesus' human experiences of hurt, jealousy, fear. We make his being beloved contingent on perfection and so deny we can be too. The internalized judgment ends up coming out in hurtful ways, something we see far too much of in our world right now.

And so, our task as church is to live the opposite. God's love claims us, transforms us, as Rumi's poem powerfully reminds us, and we need reminding. That's what Paul did in his letter, knowing that the Christians in Corinth needed to listen more to God's loving voice, happy for them just as them, than to the doubting voices of their inner children or the belittling voices of the world. He knew that if they drew on their primary identity as God's beloved they could change not only their faith community but transform the world. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, whose birthday is celebrated tomorrow, understood this too. This is why civil rights protests always began with worship. Dr. King knew that non-violent resistance was only possible if people stayed grounded in their fundamental name of beloved. No matter what others called them or did to them, no one could take away their identity as beloved children of God. That's who they were, and that's who we are too, each and every one of us.

Beloved, today we recall when Jesus went into the water and emerged knowing that he is God's beloved, God pleased with him not for anything he did but simply for showing up. I pray that we can take this identity to our own hearts, trusting that truly we are beloved of God, an identity affirmed in, rather than given through our baptism, an identity we share with Jesus. May we trust in this, remind each other of it. Grounded in our identity as God's beloved, each and every one of us, and beyond us, we can change the world. Amen.