

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."

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Building the Beloved Community

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

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Jesus was a common name, Joshua in the Hebrew, the name of the one from the Old Testament who finally led the Israelites into the promised land after Moses died. Joshua. Jesu. Jesus.

It was such a common name that he needed another identifier to distinguish him from others. So they called him Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, the Carpenter. Jesus, Joseph's son. Jesus, Mary's boy. The Nazarene. When the Pharisees were debating his status, they derisively said, No prophet has ever been said to come from Galilee. Jesus the Galilean – he can't be worth much.

But God renamed him "the Beloved," that day that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River.

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It was the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. We have no idea why Jesus chose that moment to leave home and head out to the river, where the wild man John was gathering groups, so they could come clean.

We don't know if Jesus had been thinking about this for a long time: the idea that he'd go along, too, and be dunked under the water, to start afresh, ready to live a new way. Maybe he'd been hearing of John the Baptist for a long time, the banter from villagers when they came into the carpenter shop: Have you heard about the guy at the river? Maybe it was the talk over dinner about a neighborhood teen who'd run way to the Jordan, fixated by he'd heard, worrying his parents to death. Had the teaching of John the Baptist been the subject of sermons in the synagogue, pro or con? Or had Jesus already spent a lot of time with "the Baptizer" because

Jesus was one of John's disciples himself: Jesus had been listening intently, learning, watching carefully what was going on.

We don't know for sure.

Maybe Jesus had been reading the scriptures for a long time with the rabbi, studying and discerning. Some commentators are convinced he'd been shaped by the injustices he experienced in the nearby city of Sephoris, where King Herod's son was building a huge, lavish port city, where the discrepancies between the richest elite and the poorest peasant laborers, like Jesus, was stark and cruel.

We don't know whether Jesus donned a freshly laundered robe to walk out to the river, or whether he came covered in the sweat of one who travelled miles on foot, and owned only one cloak anyway. But he came.

And however, or why ever he got there, at the Jordan River, God renamed him "Beloved."

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What would it be like for you to be renamed "Beloved"?

To have your whole sense of yourself no longer defined by what you wore to the river, or the place you came from, by who your parents were, or your occupation. What if others saw you differently now: as someone God himself, *God himself* calls, "my Beloved Child?"

Would that ever happen to you?

Has it?

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Some think that at Jesus' baptism God declared, from on high, Here's my Son, *my one and only*, so only Jesus is renamed the Beloved. It's a name given to Jesus alone.

And we may prefer to set Jesus safely on a pedestal high above us, so he alone is asked by God to do things with which we followers are never entrusted.

But friends, the most challenging, the *transforming* understanding of the words is this: at the moment of Jesus' baptism we heard evidence that not only was *Jesus* God's beloved child; we also understand more clearly that before, that we other humans – we too – are named God's beloved child, also.

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This is not just my theory. It's the theory of another man, also just beginning his ministry in his 20's or early 30's, as Jesus was. For this other man, the word "Beloved" was an inspiring, transforming word. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. began talking about "the Beloved Community" almost immediately after he left Boston University and began his first ministry in Alabama, in the mid-1950's. Building "the Beloved Community" was Dr. King's goal: it was the purpose of his movement. He spoke of it often.

What is the beloved community?¹ To Dr. King, it wasn't a utopian community where there is never conflict. He knew that among humans there is inevitably conflict: we have different ideas, different hopes. But, preached King, though we may have different views, we can choose *how* to resolve our differences, and how to *treat* our adversaries.

For King, we build the Beloved Community when we resolve our differences peaceably, through non-violence, and when we treat our adversaries with love, not as enemies. When we actually love our enemies. Not some love of sweetness and light, love not even as a *feeling*. But love as a choice we make about how we treat others – all others, even those in our community we don't *like* at all. In a Beloved Community, we *choose* to love them.²

King had been so impressed by his doctoral thesis study of Mahatma Gandhi in India: King found that Gandhi often befriended his adversaries. And most of them, in turn, had great admiration for Gandhi's courage and conviction. Gandhi hadn't hated his oppressors, but had reached out to them, again and again, with respect. The outcome of a conflict addressed violently, said King, is "emptiness and bitterness." But "the aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community....redemption...reconciliation."³

Greek is a far better language for explaining this, because it has three distinct words for our one English word "love". When Dr. King – and Jesus – asked us to love our enemies, it was not the romantic love we know by the Greek work "eros," the root of erotic. It was not even the affection between friends known as "philia", as in Philadelphia – the city of brotherly love.⁴

The core value of King's beloved community is "agape love," what he defined as *God's love* operating within the human heart: a love of understanding, a love that is not self-motivated:

Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people...It begins by loving others for their sakes [and] makes no distinction between and friend and an enemy; it is directed toward both. Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community.⁵

We *choose* to make others our "beloveds."

As God chooses to make you His.

When Jesus went to the river that day, God renamed him "My Beloved." Renamed *you* "My Beloved."

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During January and February, before we enter Lent in early March, I will be focusing on the theme of "Building the Beloved Community." Through a variety of ways, during these cold and dark months, I hope that we'll come together often, to build our Beloved Community. Let's come together to worship and break bread, to learn and be of service to our city.

Let's welcome one another and newcomers, get to know each other better. Let's be Beloved Community: not always agreeing, but seeking to understand one another, seeking always to grant to one other dignity.

Because it is a choice: How we see one another. How we open ourselves to the possibility – the great surmise Carl Scovel would say – of how a God of Love might see *us*.

Us – you and me – as Beloved, too. We choose.

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This has long been part of the King's Chapel history and tradition; it's not a new, squishy concept from a neophyte minister of yours, fixated on love. For years, what set us apart from others in the colonies, and the new nation born, was the conviction that we humans were not all depraved and sinful creatures, as many Puritans or Congregationalists were teaching. We could be beloved, by a Loving God. It set apart the New Boston Religion - Unitarians. We were viciously attacked for it – the concept of a loving God who loves us.

So William Ellery Channing in 1819 felt called to explain. He spoke eloquently in what has become known as "the Baltimore Sermon," one of the bedrock documents of Unitarianism. In that remarkable discourse Channing methodically articulates what set apart Unitarians as Christians. Among the important points, the "new Boston religion" trusted in a God of Love, not a God of anger and vengeance, like so many other Christians of that time. We could not accept the doctrine of an arrogant God whose fury could not be appeased without a human sacrifice, Jesus' death.

Instead, Channing described a God of "infinite justice, goodness and holiness." He preached:

We believe that God is infinitely good, kind, benevolent, in the proper sense of these words; good in disposition, as well as act; good, not to a few, but to all; good to every individual, as well as to the general system.⁶

The new Christian religion also said that each of us can make choices: we are neither predestined to heaven or hell, as strict Calvinists claimed; nor are we imbued with original sin that renders us deplorable as soon as we are born. And there is no literal interpretation of the Bible required.

Rather, men and women are gifted with good minds, and we can use our reason, taught William Ellery Channing and his colleagues in the new Unitarian thought: we can use our reason, to learn and grow. *God wants us* to make choices, about how we live, and the example God gave was the one who said, Love even your enemies.

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Friends, it's an exciting notion that we preach in this place; that has been preached here for centuries. That at the baptism, Jesus was named "the Beloved."

And we are, too. And the person next to us in the pew. And the person with whom you deeply disagreed yesterday, or a few years back, when this church was rocked with controversy. *All* of you, beloved.

Can it be? Can it be? Can it be?

Which is harder for you: to imagine that you are God's beloved? Or that the one who said that painful, painful thing is also?

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Hurts are real. And they don't go away without acts of reconciliation.

Grave injustices meet our gaze wherever we look, in our city and beyond. And they don't go away unless confronted courageously, at a cost. King and Gandhi knew that. We shouldn't expect any different.

In the Beloved Community of Dr. King and Gandhi and Jesus, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because we will create international standards of human decency that will not allow it. Of course there will be a cost: we who have more will need to live with less. But it's the choice we'll make, for our beloveds.

In the Beloved Community, discrimination will end, because we are sisters and brothers, and we'll insist on fairness at every turn. Of course there will be a cost: our best friends and family won't have an upper hand because we've learned whom to call. And it *is* harder to work alongside others with different languages or customs

or viewpoints, because it requires more of us. But that's the choice we make for our beloveds.

We'll demand peace rather than war. Peace is far more difficult, especially for us in a country so powerful country that we can overwhelm nearly all with our military might, should we choose. Peace requires more concessions, so others in the world feel they are being treated fairly, too. But that's the choice we make for our beloveds.

For the building of a Beloved Community, either within our church walls, or beyond.

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I asked earlier, which is harder for you: to see yourself as God's Beloved, or to see as God's beloved the other person, even the one who deeply hurt you.

The answer is different for each of us, depending on our past. Fathoming that we are Beloved? Imagining that another is?

But the two are fully intertwined, says Martin Smith, one of the Cowley Fathers at the Episcopal monastery on Memorial Drive in Cambridge. Martin Smith thinks we can't really imagine ourselves to be God's Beloved unless we can imagine everyone else to be also. And if we've seen ourselves as kin to all those other women and men wading into the River Jordan with us, named beloved by God, *then* we are nudged towards accepting that maybe we, too, are God's Beloved, too.

Martin Smith writes about this in his book, [A Season for the Spirit](#).⁷ It's a daily devotional for Lent, that I hope many of us here will read together this year. In one of the very first passages, Smith notices this timing in Matthew's baptismal story:

Jesus hears God's voice, calling him "My Beloved Son" *after* Jesus has decided to wade into the water with everyone else, not to hold himself apart, different, maybe – as John the Baptist had said to him, remember – Jesus might not really need to be forgiven or cleansed. But when Jesus chose to wade into that clogged river, with everyone else - the folks quiet or laughing or confused, all of them drenched, when he squatted down or was dipped, and then stood up again -- *that's* when the voice was heard: This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.

It's always when we bring ourselves right alongside everyone else, saying, I too could use a chance to start afresh today: *that's* when we're filled with some holy and wonderful new Spirit from beyond us, that's when we're invigorated in a way we haven't been before.

That's when we've begun building God's Beloved Community.

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At the river, Jesus was renamed Beloved. And so are we. It's your name now.
And yours. And yours.

Tell me, What difference will that make? Imagine!

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Choral Benediction: "As I Went Down in the River to Pray..."

¹ Much of this description of Dr. King's view of the "Beloved Community," comes from the King Center. <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>

² Betty Kornitzer, "The Beloved Community of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," Sermon at First Parish in Bedford Unitarian Universalist, <http://uubedford.org/spirituality/sermons/98-the-beloved-community-of-dr-martin-luther-king-jr.html>

³ Dr. King, "The Birth of a New Nation," (1957), cited in the King Center description of the Beloved Community (see note 1).

⁴ See note 1, above.

⁵ See note 1, above.

⁶ Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parker (Skinner House Books (2d Ed. 1986), 70.

⁷ Martin Smith, A Season for the Spirit: Readings for the Days in Lent (Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Massachusetts) (1991), pp. 8-11.