

“Beloved”
Sermon by Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
January 15, 2016
Matthew 3:14-17

During my first year of divinity school, I had the honor of taking a class with the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was a theologian in residence on campus at Emory University. Our reading load was intense; we learned the history of the political and religious blueprints of Apartheid in South Africa-- which was the practice of keeping white people and black Africans, as well as other people of color-- in a physical, economic and political separation. We learned about the different courageous resisters to the Apartheid system. We learned about the movement, as well as its dissenting voices-- that eventually toppled Apartheid. We heard several jaw-dropping, awe inspiring stories about the Archbishop himself. And through it all, the Arch-- as we affectionately called him-- wove his understandings of God and his theological assessment of humanity.

It sounds like heavy stuff. However, somehow, in each of the Arch's classes, we all left feeling like we had been bathed in God's love. My classmates and I always agreed that sum of each lecture he gave was this: *You are God's beloved*. In fact, in one of our classes, he must have repeated this several times, because I have written in my notebook, "You are God's beloved. You are God's beloved. You are God's beloved." How I wish I could say that with his accent and his piercing stare that made each of us feel singled out in the lecture hall of 70 people! It humbled me to receive such a sermon from this particular man-- one who had borne the insults of racism and oppression on his body and his spirit and had united voices to subvert and transform this oppression. I mean, what had I done to merit such a man calling me God's beloved?

But I must say, to have a starting place of being God's beloved is a good way to begin a spiritual journey. Knowing we are loved inspires goodness. This love invites a relationship to love God back, with our actions and our lives. For me, having God's love as a starting point for a spiritual journey-- rather than a sense of utter unworthiness-- sets the trajectory (or direction) for how this collaboration with God will go. And while human love may be flawed and sometimes fail us, God's love is a love that will not let us go.

First impressions matter, and this scene of Jesus getting baptised by John at the Jordan River is our first exposure in Matthew's gospel of the adult Jesus. I suppose John must

have felt humbled too when Jesus asked John to baptise him-- “shouldn’t *you* be baptizing *me*?!” John asks Jesus. But Jesus tells John, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Now, most of us would figure that Jesus was already a pretty righteous guy, blameless even. But, as African-American preacher and activist Brad Braxton points out, righteousness doesn’t just point to one’s status in direct relationship to God; the Greek word for righteousness-- *dikaion*-- can also be translated as “justice.” “Righteousness encapsulates God’s passionate commitment to set right the things that are wrong.”¹

Another meaning I see in Jesus receiving baptism from John is that these two men-- whose mothers were cousins and friends, and had not even been born before they were introduced-- would both preach a message that would ultimately cost them their lives. Water, which we see in scriptures as both giver and destroyer of life, is not always tame. So, when we choose to come to the font, or present our children to the font for baptism, we are embarking on a journey that could call us and our children to anything. All we can be certain of is this: at the moment of baptism, God names us as God’s son, God’s daughter, God’s beloved-- and that love continues no matter what storm or drought may find us.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. prophesied to the precious, beloved nature of all God’s children. He taught us in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail that “Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly... injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” That conviction led King and those who boldly marched with him to endure the high pressure jets of fire hoses, as they fought for equality between the races and for economic justice. Some, including King, were hospitalized by the power of those fire hoses. But just as that water hospitalized, it also *baptized* society’s understanding in transformative and remarkable ways. The televised news reports showing young activists attacked with firehoses and dogs created a moral turning point for many. And in one situation, in Birmingham, Alabama, when a crowd of over 1,000 students knelt in prayer before the Birmingham jail that housed Martin Luther King, the police commissioner commanded his men to turn on the firehoses on the youth and children. Nobody moved. The commissioner yelled at them, demanding that they follow his orders. Instead, the civil servants dropped their hoses. One fireman cried, saying “We can’t continue to do this.”²

¹ Brad Braxton, “Ready for Revolution: Matthew 3:13-17” in *The Christian Century*, Jan. 2, 2002 (in this article, Braxton also quotes Thomas Long on the translation of righteousness.)

² Stan Duncan, “Hold Fast to the Dream” and Jonathan Reider, *Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King Jr’s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle that Changed a Nation* p. 120

Once we see our neighbors-- whether they look like us or not-- as God's beloved, we have a mandate for how we treat them. We must treat them as we would Jesus Christ if he were in our midst. I grew up in the South and am an heir to the legacy of racism. Like Martin Luther King, I was born in Atlanta-- but my birth came 8 years after King's assassination in Memphis. From the time I was in preschool I remember learning about King's dream of living into God's Beloved Community here on earth. I grew up to believe that hope for King's dream was part of what it means to be an American. Even though I was beginning to see that combatting racism was not on everyone's agenda, I assumed that most Americans were in agreement that the general values King established are standard fare that decent people would at least pay lip service to.

Are there fewer decent people today, or is standing up for racial justice no longer a measure of decency? In the last year, months, and even days we have seen the legitimizing of the white supremacist alt-right as a viable political force. Our President-Elect has dismissed as "talk, talk, talk" and "sad" the legacy of US House Representative John Lewis-- whose head was bashed and skull fractured by police while taking part in peaceful demonstrations during the civil rights movement.

I see a racism in this country unleashed that I find truly frightening, because as it threatens any of my black or brown brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, it also threatens me. Just as Jesus was submerged in the same waters John shared, *together* we are God's beloved. I cannot sit passively while others' rights are threatened beneath the smokescreen of a Twitter feed, so I am going to march in Washington, DC next Saturday with others in witness to the America I want to see.

When I was picking hymns for this Sunday, I was surprised that I did not gravitate to the usual peace and justice freedom songs that defined the Civil Rights Movement. I love these songs. But instead, I chose as our closing hymn, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." This was said to be King's favorite hymn, and it was the one he requested as he was waiting on the motel balcony for his friends to get ready he called out to saxophonist Ben Branch to play it "real pretty" for the meeting later that night. Moments later, he was shot and killed.

We are God's beloved, and while God's love is a gift that cannot be earned, it is also a gift that asks huge responsibility from us. There is no telling where the waters of baptism may lead each of us, but have courage, beloved ones: we can count on God to take our hand while leading us there.

May God...

(Lips) Unleash our tongues for eloquence if we should hesitate and stammer as God did for Jeremiah.

(Heart) In moments of darkness hear our laments with an understanding heart as you did the cry of the Psalmist.

(Eyes) Give us vision to recognize our brothers and sisters of all races-- and ourselves-- as God's Beloved ones.

(Hands) Endow us with a healing touch and a forgiving word as God did with Jesus the Christ.

(Feet) Guide our feet, while we run this race.

Now may the peace of Christ, which surpasses all understanding, go with us now and wherever the waters of baptism may lead us.