

“God’s work is coming together right now in this baptism”

Matthew 3: 13-17

This week, as I was trying to figure out just exactly what I would say for this sermon today, after reading commentary after commentary, I will tell you that I was also having some very unpreacher-y thoughts. Instead of being excited about the privilege to preach the Good News this week, I kept thinking to myself-“How many more ways can I talk about God’s grace? How much more can I say about God’s love?” All I could think about this week, as I read this passage, was “Surely, everyone wants to hear something else, something new, something different. To me, it seems like week after week, I keep saying the same thing-God loves us more than we could imagine. To me, each week, it feels like I keep saying the same thing: We are God’s beloved. To me, each week it feels like the same sermon, like some sort of broken record or computer glitch that just keeps repeating the same line over and over again. God loves us. God loves us. God loves us.

So I will tell you this week, as I was preparing for this sermon about remembering our baptisms, I was hoping for something new. I was hoping God would give me something else to say. I didn’t know exactly what but I was hoping for something more exciting than God loves us, something more exciting than just

we are God's Beloved, something more than just we are named and claimed as God's very own. I will tell you, as I was preparing for this sermon, I was hoping for something more, something life changing, something life transforming, something that would shake us all up and fill us with passion for the Kingdom of God, something like a lightning bolt coming down from the sky, something that would make us all sit and say Wow! This is it!

But as the week progressed, I discovered that wasn't going to happen, or at least not in the way I expected it to happen. Sure, God was certainly answering my request for something earth-shattering, something life changing, for something life transforming but it wasn't something new. It was the same answer that God had been giving me each week. So In response to my request for something that would fill us with passion for the Kingdom of God, I discovered God was going to keep saying the same thing over and over again. It was almost as if I could hear a voice in my head, every time I said I wasn't something new, a voice saying "What else do they need to know? Tell them I love them. Tell them they are my Beloved. Tell them they are my children in whom I am well pleased." What else is there? What's more important than that?

Therefore, as the week progress, I realized that God wasn't going to give me anything else "new" to say. Thankfully, God was going to keep giving me exactly what we all need to hear, what we all need to hold as truth, what is the very base of

our foundation of faith. God was going to keep reminding us how much God loves us. And that truly is life-changing news. That is truly earth-shattering news. And that is certainly something we need to hear over and over again.

So I'm sure all of you are wondering, what brought about my change in attitude? How did I go from saying, non-chalantly, "God loves us, ho hum. What else is new to saying passionately, excitedly God loves us, to feeling the earth-shattering, life-transforming fact of that news upon our lives, to knowing how great a gift that really is for us as people of faith.

Well, I will tell you that the change happened because I stepped back and realized my mistake. My first mistake was that I assumed too much. I assumed that because we all come to church week after week, that everyone would already know and believe that God loves them more than they could imagine. I assumed that everyone would already know and believe that they were God's beloved in whom God is well pleased. I assumed that everyone was tired of hearing this amazing news week after week. Well as I said, that was my first mistake. I assumed certain things.

I took for granted that everyone knew this. I took for granted that everyone believed this. I took for granted that everyone knew deep down that they were created in the image of God. I took for granted that everyone knew this bit of

wonderful news was and is true. And in reality that couldn't be farther from the truth.

Let me explain. This week, as I was grumpily thinking to myself, God give me something new to say, counter to my grumpiness, every interaction I had with people was telling me that people need to hear once again that God loves them more than they could imagine. Counter to my assumptions, Every experience was telling me that we as people of faith need to be reminded that God accepts us just as we are. Counter to what I took for granted, Every conversation was telling me that we as children of God need to hear over and over again that God desires to do amazing things for us and through us.

It all started as I was sharing with some minister friends about our Remembering our Baptism service. I was sharing how great a service it was and someone asked, well, what makes it so great? You are just asking people to stick their hands in a bowl of water.

Now let me stop right there. That particular minister wasn't being rude or crass. He was just trying to get me see beyond just the details of the service, the details that I try to make sure are covered so that the worship service can go along just fine.

So back to my story. Sure his question did catch me by surprise and yes I had to stop and think about it for a moment. What really does make this service great? What makes this service moving? What makes this service renewing?

It took me a few moments until I remembered an experience that happened a few years ago. On that particular Sunday, as I was preparing for this just service when a young man came into our sanctuary and you could tell, he was visibly upset. He was looking for something. He looked broken. He looked lost. He looked like he was hurting in his very soul.

I introduced myself to him and I could tell he needed some space and grace. So I invited him back to my office and just let him talk. He shared how his life was falling apart. He shared how his marriage and family seemed to be crumbling. He shared his pain with me.

And as he was talking and sharing about his life in the present, he also shared how he felt like all he had ever been told by people was what he had done wrong, that he didn't measure up, that he didn't fit in.

His brokenness, his hurt, his pain stopped me for a moment and all I could think was, "How has he never heard that he is a child of God? How has he never heard that he is loved more than he could imagine?" I realized that God was giving me an opportunity to do just that. I told this gentleman that God loved him, that he

was enough, and that he was God's beloved. And the look in that man's eyes was amazing. At first, I could tell that he thought I was just saying that because I was the preacher and I have to be nice to everyone. But as the words sank in, some light came into his eyes, some bit of hope filled his face. Some bit of new life uplifted his Spirit.

Now I will tell you that I thought, that was my God moment for the day but during the service, as people were coming forward and dipping their hands in the water, I saw that same bit of light filling people's eyes. I saw that same bit of hope filling people's faces. I saw that same bit of new life filling everyone's Spirits.

And in that moment I realized something earth-shattering. And I'm going to share it with you today.

Nowhere should we assume that simply because we sit in the pews week after week, the church, the ministers, the people who sit around us, no one should ever assume that simply because people are sitting in the pews week after week that they know that they are loved by God, that they know they are God's beloved, that they know they are named and claimed as one of God's own.

That bit of knowledge doesn't come through just by sitting in the pews. It comes through our interactions with one another. It comes through by breaking bread with one another. It comes through by being in relationship with one another.

It comes through by sharing and experiencing the grace, the hope, and the new life of God's Kingdom in our midst with one another. It comes through by recognizing that we are all created in the image of God, that we are all God's Beloved and that we all need to remind each other of that fact each and every day as we go through life.

We can't just assume that because people walk through the front doors of our church that they will immediately hear and believe that God loves them more than they could imagine. It doesn't happen that way. The only way people can know this bit of life transforming, life changing, life giving news is if we share it, if we say it, and if everything we do, our words that we say and the things that we do, reinforce that bit of wonderful news. People can't know this bit of life giving news, that God loves them more than they could imagine, unless we tell it to everybody we meet.

And let's face it... the wider Church, and yes even this church has not done the best job in proclaiming God's love. For people who don't attend church every week, all they hear and all they think we as people of faith care about is who is in and who is out. People on the outside say we, as the church, tend to talk more about who doesn't belong rather than proclaim the grace and love of God.

As the church, as people of faith, we have failed in our mission. We have caused more hurt than given hope. We have caused more brokenness than help create reconciliation.

Here's the truth: God's message hasn't changed. Since the beginning of time, God's message has been the same. God called all of creation good. God claimed and named all of us as God's own. God called all of us God's beloved but somewhere along the way, we as people of faith, we as people of God decided not to listen. We thought we heard something else. We heard that it was all about rules and regulations. We heard that we had to do certain things to make God love us. We heard that we had to earn God's grace. Somewhere along the way, we as people of faith, as the church, distorted God's message. It's no wonder people don't come to church anymore. Who wants to go if all we are going to hear is that we are not enough, we are not good enough? Who wants to come and be a part of this institution if all people are going to hear is that they could never be worthy enough for God's grace and God's love?

No one but for some reason that is the Church's message to the wider world. To tell you the truth, I wouldn't want to be a part of it either. That's not why I come to church. That's not why I want to be part of a community of faith. I come, yes because I'm the minister and yes, because I get paid to come to church. But I also am here as a person of faith. I come and belong to this community of faith

because somewhere along the way someone told me that I was a child of God, named and claimed as God's very own and that changed my world. It transformed my life. It made me want to become the person God created me to be.

As the church, let's face it. we have failed in our mission. We have not told everyone God's life-changing, life-transforming bit of news. And what I discovered this week is God's not going to give us anything "new" to say until everyone hears and believes it. God knows something we have all forgotten. It is too important for the coming of God's Kingdom for anyone not to know this bit of Good news.

The world needs to hear that God loves us more than we could ever imagine. The world needs to hear that we are God's Beloved in whom God is well pleased. The world needs to hear that God desires to be in relationship with us because God wants to do wonderful things for us and through us. The world needs this little bit of hope, this little bit of light, this little bit of new life infused into all our everyday existences. And we are just the ones who are called to share it because we know it to be true!

We need to share it because as much as I hate to admit it, apparently everyone has lives outside of this church. People have experiences outside of these walls, experiences that tell them something different. Each one of us are

surrounded by voices each and every day that tell us we are not enough, that tell us we are not good enough, that tell us no matter what we do, we will never measure up. And these are the loudest voices in our lives.

And it is our job as the church, as a community of faith, as the people of God to silence these negative voices and remind people that God is saying something different. God is calling each of us God's Beloved. God is telling us over and over again that God loves us more than we could ever imagine. God is telling us over and over again that we are God's children in whom God is well pleased.

That's what makes the difference. That's what bring us hope. That is what infuses our lives with the grace and peace of the Kingdom of God. That the God who created the heavens and the earth loves us. The God who is Almighty and Majestic wraps God's arms around us and holds us close when we are hurting. The God who was, who is, and who is to come, knows our coming and our going and never leaves us alone.

The God who brought forth light out of the darkness has claimed us and named us as God's very own.

Now that is something we should never ever get tired of hearing. And more importantly, that is something we should never ever get tired of sharing. It is this

bit of hope, this bit of light, this bit of new life makes all the difference for us as God's children.

In a few minutes, everyone will be invited to remember our baptisms, to remember what it was like to emerge from the water, to remember what it was like to have the water on our fore heads and to remember God's promises made to you that day.

And as we dip our hands in the water, let us Remember that we are claimed and named. remember that we have been transformed and that our lives are called to blessings for others.

Remember that from the moment we emerged from the waters, we were called to live a life based on the principles of the Kingdom of God. And realize that our mission in life is God's mission for the world: to bring love, healing, comfort, justice and peace for all of God's creation.

In just a few moments, you will be invited to come forward and remember your baptism. And as you do, Remember your call as one of God's children to bring hope and grace to all that are hurting. remember your call as one of God's servants to support those around you on their journey. remember your call to pray for one another and to pray to nourish your spirit.

As we dip our hands in the water, Remember whose we are. We are God's, named and claimed as one of God's own, loved more than we could ever imagine.

Remember we are children of God in whom God takes great delight. Let us Never forget this bit of good news because this bit of life-transforming, this bit of earth-shattering, this bit of life giving news makes all the difference for you and me as children of God, loved more than we could ever imagine. Amen.