

MT 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Isaiah 42:1-9

¹Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. ²He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. ⁵Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: ⁶I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, ⁷to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. ⁸I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. ⁹See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

First of all: thank you, for the privilege of walking with you, who *are* Emanuel United Church of Christ, in these months of renewal for our pastor, and for us as well.

I knew several months ago that I'd be here with you today, and I began gathering my thoughts for this morning. But something—I suspect Someone—made sure that I didn't draw any conclusions until just this past week. I've just completed three wonderful weeks with my brother, sisters, their children, and grandchildren, and I've spent several months going through my late father's letters and papers, from as far back as 1940. These months have helped me reflect on how we come to be who we are, and helped me clarify what I'm sharing with you today.

If you're hearing this text about Jesus' baptism for the first time—perhaps some of you are—what do you need to know about Jesus to make sense of it all? This is Matthew's introduction to Jesus, at the onset of His ministry. But remember: we do not appear suddenly, fully formed and complete. In significant measure, we all are products of our families and our communities. Including Jesus. Before our text, Matthew tells the story of the angel speaking to Jesus' mother, giving her Son a calling and an identity; Matthew also introduces us to Jesus' ancestry. And along the way, Matthew echoes the

centuries-old expectation in the Jewish community that God was up to something, and would send someone to lead them to freedom (see Isaiah 42).

In other words, amid the commotion and confusion of Jesus' birth, the visit of the Magi, the attempt by Herod to find and kill the Christ Child...Jesus' life remains grounded in a sense of purpose. So does His baptism--it links Him to the people He will serve. By the time this takes place, Jesus is inseparably bound to a family tree, a promise, and a long and rich history.

Then Jesus is given one other, even more powerful, identifying mark. I am struck by verse 17. It's told in the language of a Father-Son relationship; since I'm a father *and* a son, it has a special place in my heart, but it is every bit as valid for the relationship between a mother and daughter--or *any* family bond. But how can the relationship between *this* parent, and *this* child come alive for us?

Families can mark us forever, though not always in a life-affirming way. Our family's stamp on us may be limiting, or, hopefully, liberating. What God was doing in Jesus was not just a task to which Jesus was assigned by someone higher up in some organization. This was, in Jesus' own language, a Father, a Son, and the Holy Spirit, putting everything they were and had on the line—for us. I've seen parents send their children off to war; it must have been something like that, as God in this Beloved One steps into harm's way.

Here, the God of heaven speaks lovingly, as any good parent would, of the Son. But notice: this affirmation was not given *after* Jesus completed the mission or passed the test. In Matthew, this blessing is given *before Jesus publicly says a word or performs a miracle*. That is amazing: God points to this barely known young man, and declares to the world that "This is my Son, the beloved; in Him I am well pleased." Out of un-earned, unconditional love God declares: "Take note, all creation: *this* man is my Son! I am *proud* of Him, and I want the world to know! "

Jesus would need that affirmation ringing in His ears, in the days, weeks, months and years ahead, facing a world that would turn against Him. And for the record, *I'm* not always happy with Jesus, who challenges me and confronts my assumptions. In our multicultural, diverse world, we are often tentative about openly identifying with Jesus. Sometimes we try to smooth out the rough edges, to tame the wildness of His message, to refine and edit Jesus until He is less unsettling, and more like us. Yet this Jesus, dripping wet as He steps out of the water, uncompromising in calling the world to account, stood worthy of God's affirmation, and remains today the standard by which we measure greatness in humankind. Through the prophet Isaiah, God declares: "Here is my chosen, in whom my soul delights!" He was, and is, God's beloved.

My father was a quiet man; it wasn't easy for him to say what he felt. But especially in my youth, I needed to know: how does he see me? Is he proud, or embarrassed, by his son? I know I made him wonder at times why he ever wanted a family! But while I don't remember the first time I heard him express his approval; it

happened throughout my life, and I cherish the times when I did hear him say, sometimes publicly, or just face to face, “I’m proud of you.”

To those of us who are parents: do you want to know how to be a good mother or father? We could do no better than this. Every child—every person—wants to know that we are “beloved,” in whom someone is “well pleased.” Yet unlike Jesus, I am not quite perfect, and I’m sorry to report that neither are you. We may try to make ourselves worthy; we often try to impress... But the Good News of the Gospel is that God’s affirmation is already ours, in the living gift of this One who heard those words first, and shares them with us. We are God’s beloved. Our place at God’s table is waiting.

By the way: that defines how we are called treat those around us! The next time we baptize a new member of our spiritual family, remember what happened when *Jesus* stepped out of the waters of baptism. God’s words to Jesus are God’s words to us. And those who gather with you today, regardless of what you may see or think, are, literally, also God’s “beloved,” in whom God is “well pleased” before we take our first breath.

In our text, John baptizes a previously-unknown son of questionable birth, who would be troublesome to his friends and disturbing, even dangerous, to a world that would ultimately reject Him. He would become, by the world’s standards, an embarrassment. But not to God, who boldly pronounces Jesus delightful, a source of joy.

So: two questions. First: Are we who claim to follow Him also willing to openly *delight* in Him, if for no other reason than that God does?

Second: We may be a bundle of contradictions and unanswered questions, and so are all those around us. We are taught to be suspicious of others, and fearful of “them”. But God delights in *us*, Scripture says. So can we delight in ourselves, and each other, and our neighbors of all kinds, simply knowing that God already does?

You see: God affirmed Jesus as a source of pleasure, pride, and affirmation. We too, with all our rough edges, are now God’s delight, no matter what anyone else declares about us. Because when God decides someone is delightful, no one else gets a vote.