

“Well Pleased”
A sermon by
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First Presbyterian Church
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Our text for this Wednesday comes from Mark 1:4-11. Hear the Word of God:

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Here ends our reading. This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

It strikes me that so much of how we relate to the world is in relation to the roles that we fill in it. Think of all the roles that are represented in this room right now. Among us we are daughter, son, father, friend, mother, wife, husband, employee, accountant, builder, minister, musician, scout master, Republican, Democrat, volunteer, board member, Vegetarian, Rotarian, church member and a host of other roles, all of which carry with them a set of expectations, responsibilities and assumptions and tie us with an invisible thread to others who share those roles. Developmental psychology tells us that our association and identification with these roles and the groups that those roles then place us in constitutes what it calls our "mythic membership" level of consciousness. Our mythic membership in certain groups shapes who and what we identify or over-identify ourselves with in both conscious and subconscious ways and influences what loyalties we possess. When basketball season rolls around in the Carolinas, for instance, you get a good crash course in mythic membership. When strangers on the street are bound together by a silent understanding and loyalty to one another and a shared value system- namely that their team wins- based on what color windbreaker or necktie or ball cap they wear.

Our mythic membership extends to our race, our socioeconomics, our ancestry, our life experiences. These influence our sense of security, power and belonging and also have a lot to do with patterns of behavior that we accept or don't accept, what we think is right and wrong. Turn the equation around, and how others relate to you has much to do with the assumptions they make about your identification with mythic membership, again, in conscious or unconscious ways. People have made assumptions about my value system based on the fact that I am a minister. Sometimes they are right, sometimes they are wrong. Charlotte natives in the room- ever have someone make an assumption about your values based on what high school you went to or the peer group you identified with if you went to a local college? Much of the spiritual journey is distilling what values come from these mythic memberships and what comes from God. And a large part of the challenges we face as Christians in the world is determining where our true allegiance lies. What center of gravity do our values orbit around and is it faithful? What do we anchor our identity in and how does that influence how we live in the world, relate to the world, spend our money and time and energy, devotion and love?

The text of the baptism of Jesus depicts the initiation of Jesus' public ministry, beginning with a powerful affirmation of his identity by God. Here is Jesus- a Jew, carpenter's son, young adult- whose mythic membership in all of these different groups and more is suddenly supplanted by something new altogether- now he is the son of God in whom God is well pleased. This role of child of God takes primacy over every other role in which Jesus found meaning and it does not always come easy for himself or others. "The son of man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus would say. When his mother and brother come to a crowded house where he is teaching to take him home, he says, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." In another verse the people from his hometown are seen muttering, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" A prophet is rarely welcome in his own hometown.

The other systems in which Jesus found value and meaning in his life were radically reordered at his baptism. Child of God is the new anchor for his identity, the center of gravity around which all that he says and does in the world, all whom he befriends now revolves. And he challenges us, in some of his most difficult words in the gospels, by our baptisms, to experience the same radical reorientation. "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life." Jesus says this in so many ways in the gospels. And, of course, this message is reinforced by Paul who says, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Jesus and Paul are saying that of all the roles you value and fill, of all the priorities those values then establish, none are more important than your role as child of God. None are more important than the values of the kingdom. All others must be left behind. Now, I'm not talking about, parents, abandoning your children or all of us just walking out on our responsibilities although when Jesus called his disciples, this is what he did- going so far as to say to a man grieving the death of his father, "let the dead bury the dead." What I'm talking about is the reorientation of what has primacy in our lives. What has primacy in our value systems, over our emotional

space, how we spend our energy and where we give our attention. Jesus is calling for the reorientation of our lives so that every other role we fill falls in line behind the fact that we are a child of God and disciple of Jesus Christ. And every other value that we hold takes a back seat to our allegiance to the values of the kingdom, no matter what consequence allegiance to those kingdom values may bring in our hearts, our homes, our workplace, our society and the relationships we hold most dear.

This is part of God's program for redeeming the world. And we all have a vital role to play in it beginning with the way we immerse ourselves in the waters of our baptism. Because something happened in those waters to Jesus. And if you have been baptized by water or by the fire of the Holy Spirit in your heart through faith, something happened to you too. By baptism you are not just the many roles you fill. You are claimed by God, a beloved child in whom God is well pleased. And this changes things. It has something to do with claiming who we truly are, and living a life consistent with our identity as a child of God until we become what we are ultimately called to be- the very image and likeness of Jesus Christ in the world.

Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest and founder of Homeboy Industries- a gang-intervention program located in a particular neighborhood of Los Angeles that is considered the gang capital of the world. In his recent book, *Tattoos on the Heart*, he tells of his experience working in what he calls the ghetto. In it he talks about the baptisms he has done, saying that baptism can be an awakening, like the clearing of a new path for a gang member's life as life is reoriented. He writes, "On a Saturday in 1996 I am set to baptize George at Camp Munz (a neighborhood camp he leads). He delays doing this with the other priests because he only wants me to do it. He also wants to schedule the event to follow his successful passing of the GED exam. He sees it as something of a twofer celebration. I actually know seventeen-year-old George and his nineteen-year-old brother, Cisco. Both are gang members from a barrio in the projects, but I have only really come to know George over his nine-month stint in this camp. I have watched him move gradually from his hardened posturing to being a man in possession of himself and his gifts. Taken out of the environment that keeps him unsettled and crazed, not surprisingly, he begins to thrive at Camp Munz. Now he is nearly unrecognizable. The hard kid with his gangster pose has morphed into a thoughtful, measured man, aware of gifts and talents previously obscured by the unreasonable demands of his gang life.

"The Friday night before George's baptism, Cisco, George's brother, is walking home before midnight when the quiet is shattered, as it so often is in his neighborhood, by gunshots. Some rivals creep up and open fire, and Cisco falls in the middle of St. Louis Street, half a block from his apartment. He is killed instantly. His girlfriend, Annel, nearly eight months pregnant with their first child, runs outside. She cradles Cisco in her arms and lap, rocking him as if to sleep, and her screams syncopate with every motion forward. She continues this until the paramedics pry him away from her arms.

"I don't sleep much that night. It occurs to me to cancel my presence at the Mass the next morning at Camp Munz to be with Cisco's grieving family. But then I remember George and his baptism. When I arrive before Mass, with all the empty chairs in place in the mess hall, there is George standing by himself, holding his newly acquired GED certificate. He heads toward me, waving his GED and beaming. We hug each other. He is in a borrowed, ironed, crisp white shirt

and a thin black tie. His pants are the regular, camp-issue camouflage, green and brown, I am completely wiped out, yet trying to keep my excitement at pace with George's. At the beginning of Mass, with the mess hall now packed, I ask him. "What is your name?" "George Martinez," he says, with an overflow of confidence. "And, George, what do you ask of God's church?" "Baptism," he says with a steady, barely contained smile. It is the most difficult baptism of my life. For as I pour water over George's head: "Father...Son...Spirit," I know I will walk George outside alone after and tell him what happened. As I do, and I put my arm around him, I whisper gently as we walk out onto the baseball field, "George, your brother Cisco was killed last night."

I can feel all the air leave his body as he heaves a sigh that finds itself in a sob in an instant. We land on a bench. His face seeks refuge in his open palms, and he sobs quietly. Most notable is what isn't present in his rocking and gentle wailing. I've been in this place before many times. There is always flailing and rage and promises to avenge things. There is none of this in George. It is as if the commitment he has just made in water, oil, and flame has taken hold and his grief is pure and true and more resembles the heartbreak of God. George seems to offer proof of the efficacy of this thing we call sacrament, and he manages to hold all the complexity of this great sadness, right here, on this bench, in his tender weeping. I had previously asked him in the baptismal rite, after outlining the contours of faith and the commitment "to live as though this truth was true." "Do you clearly understand what you are doing?" And he pauses, and he revs himself up in a gathering of self and soul and says, "Yes, I do."

And, yes, he does. In the monastic tradition, the highest form of sanctity is to live in hell and not lose hope. George clings to his hope and his faith and his GED certificate and chooses to march, resilient, into his future."...Sometimes resilience arrives in the moment you discover your own unshakeable goodness. Poet Galway Kinnell writes, "Sometimes it's necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness." And when that happens, we begin to foster tenderness for our own human predicament. A spacious and undefended heart finds room for everything you are and carves space for everybody else."

"Do you clearly understand what you are doing?" You are more than the roles you fill. You are a beloved child of God, in whom God is well pleased. This is the anchor that will hold you fast in the storms of life. This is the center of gravity around which you are to revolve. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, live as though this truth was true. Amen.