

Sermon Epiphany 1A: Finding Our Identity as God's Beloved

Introduction: God Sees Us As God Sees Jesus

This Sunday's Gospel lesson reminds me of an understanding about preachers and preaching

That I've heard all my life and that's the theory that every preacher only has one sermon;

Only one sermon that she or he gives week in and week out.

Oh the one sermon gets dressed up in one way or another from week to week;

But essentially it's the same sermon every time.

And you can see this one sermon idea in the Bible;

The lesson from Acts shows St. Peter's 'one sermon'.

After being restored by Jesus after Peter denied Jesus three times;

And after being witness to the Spirit coming upon non-Jewish believers;

Peter consistently preaches this sermon about God's impartiality

And that God welcomes everyone.

John the Baptist's one sermon was 'Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand';

And he dresses it up with, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you of the coming kingdom

St. John, in his Gospel, speaks to belief in Christ

As the only thing necessary to enter into the kingdom of God;

And St. Paul picks up a similar one sermon

In preaching over and over that we are saved by grace alone and not by our works.

You may have noticed some preachers in this pulpit over the years

Or in other churches who have one sermon

And dress it up in lots of different clothes and stories, but still offer one message.

There's a story about a preacher who preached week in and week out
About the importance of full immersion baptism for someone to be saved
And truly enter into the Christian life.

Week in and week out, year after year, whatever the scripture reading was that Sunday;
This preacher would talk about full immersion baptism
As the predominant means of God's grace and the Christian life.

The church loved their pastor, but as the years past, they got a little tired of the same sermon;
So the leaders of the congregation met with their pastor;
And they all agreed that the next Sunday the pastor wouldn't prepare a sermon;
But would enter the pulpit and receive a piece of scripture
Chosen by these church leaders for him to preach from.

The leaders searched the scripture and the next Sunday came and the pastor entered the pulpit;
He was handed the first verse of Genesis,
"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

He said the verse out loud several times, searching for the Spirit and a message;
And commenced talking about God's great work at creation;
About the earth being a formless void and about how the Holy Spirit
Moved over the waters at the start of the creation;
And with that reference to the Spirit and the waters, he smiled
And launched into a sermon about the need for full immersion baptism.

I don't really believe preachers have only one sermon, but if that theory were true;
Then we may be touching on my one sermon this morning.

Because this story colors much of my understanding of who Jesus is

And who we are because we have been baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection.

For if Jesus is who we see in this morning's Gospel,

Then by our baptisms we are seen by God in a new way, but in the same way;

We are seen not as the sinners that we are;

Or not merely as women and men, mothers and fathers and children;

Not merely as the rich and the poor, the young and the old,

But we are seen as beloved children of God;

As heirs with Christ in all the love and grace and riches of God.

We know who we are and whose we are by the baptism of our Lord;

Because the source of Jesus' worth is the true source of our worth.

Jesus, the Beloved of God

John the Baptist makes a reappearance this Sunday calling the people of God to a new life;

To a new life through repentance and the ceremonial washing away of their sins

In the River Jordan (full immersion baptism by the way).

People flocked to John in the wilderness

To be cleansed of the sins that had marked their lives and separated them from God;

To be cleansed so they could begin again to follow God's commandments

And to walk with God in their lives again or for the first time.

Now our tradition and belief is that Jesus was without sin;

That Jesus was never separated by word or deed from the love and the will of God;

And yet here He comes wanting John to baptize Him.

John refuses at first, and suggests that Jesus should be baptizing John.

Jesus, in obedience to God's will, allows Himself to be baptized

And, in doing so, prepared the way for all of us to share in Jesus through baptism.

In Jesus' baptism, the heaven are opened through Him;

And the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, rests or dwells with Him;

The full power and presence of God's love rests on and dwells in Jesus.

And a voice, a voice from heaven is heard saying,

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

Beloved, that's my one sermon;

Jesus is God's beloved and so are we.

At the very core of who Jesus knows Himself to be is the understanding that He is God's beloved

It is at the core of Jesus life and ministry, beloved of God;

It is the source of all He says and does, God's beloved;

It is Christ's very identity.

So, a struggle with Satan in the wilderness is overcome by resting in this reality, beloved;

Conflict with religious leaders are faced, not in trembling or in fear;

But in the reality that Jesus is loved by God.

Teachings, miracles, raising persons from the dead;

Struggling in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before He died for us;

Going to the cross to die among criminals, among the hated of the world;

Are all faced and accomplished and endured with the deep understanding;

And promise that Jesus is God's beloved.

And we who are on the other side of the first Easter morning

Believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, conquering sin and death, still loved by God;

In triumph and in trial, Jesus lives and loves and minister in the knowledge

That He is beloved;

That who He is and what He does are based on one truth, one reality;

That He is loved by God;

And so are you, and so am I.

We Are God's Beloved

Some decades ago, two psychologists wrote a book together called *Person to Person*;

And in part of this work they listed a series of things that validate us as persons;

Beliefs or understandings that are the source for our self-worth and approach to life;

And unfortunately they listed things that keep many of us

From living the life God has called us to live as God's beloved children.

They wrote, "The most important thing is to have a career;

The most important thing is to get married;

The most important thing is to have money;

The most important thing is to have everyone like you.

The most important thing is to dress well;

The most important thing is to be or at least act sophisticated;

The most important thing is to love your parents;

The most important thing is to be a parent;

The most important thing is to speak correct English;

The most important thing is to work or to study;

The most important thing is to win;

The most important thing is to be ahead of everyone else;

And get your way every time.

We could go on, for there are many other voices telling us what the basis of our true worth is;

But they are all lies;

They are all wrong and lead us into any number of dead ends and cul-de sacs.

Today's Gospel proclaims that there is only one most important view of who we are;

And that one most important view comes to us in the form of the gift of our baptism.

The most important thing is that God loves us God loves you. God loves me.

We are God's beloved, just as we are;

And we have been invited to live our lives in this love;

To base our self-understanding and the quality of our lives

On nothing less than the truth that we are God's beloved children.

In the Eastern tradition of the Christian faith, there's a beautiful story about Jesus' baptism;

They say that when Jesus came up out of the waters of the Jordan;

He didn't come up sputtering or wiping His eyes;

He came up laughing.

In the knowledge that He was beloved of God;

And living His life in God's love and will, Jesus laughs.

And so let me invite you this morning and every morning

To remember that you, too, are God's beloved and so is everyone you meet;

Remember and share in Jesus' joy and laughter all the days of your life,

Whatever you may face

For you are loved, you, too, are the beloved of God.

And if you're looking for one sermon to hold onto in life, this is a keeper.

Amen.