

CLAIMING THE VOICE¹
Luke 3: 15-22
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Belief in God is widespread in America. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the organization that specializes in surveying religious belief in America, reported that 92% of Americans have some kind of belief in God. That is based on a survey of 35,000 Americans conducted in 2008.²

What is far more difficult for people to believe is that they are truly loved by God. And I expect that that is also one of the most difficult things for many church members to accept about God. Let's think together about that today.

I

When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, it was clearly a powerful moment in his life. He felt the clear voice of God speaking to him, and what God said to him was this: *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*³

You know very well how hard it is to believe that. There are a thousand voices saying you are not loved, that you have to earn God's love, do good

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, January 10, 2010.

² See www.pewforum.org.

³ Luke 3: 22.

things and think good thoughts and smile good smiles for God to love you. Bad things happen to us in life, and we tend to think that God must not be happy with us. God must not love us. We think that we have to do something, live better, pray more often, feel more spiritual, go to church more regularly, give more money...you know the list of things and you can add to it.

But what would it mean to you if you came to church and heard the voice of God saying, "You are my beloved daughter; you are my beloved son. I love you with an everlasting love. I hold you close to my heart. You belong to me and I belong to you. I will be with you no matter what happens to you. I will not leave you. Don't be afraid. You can trust that I love you no matter what you feel, what you do, or where you go. You are my beloved. That is who you truly are."⁴

That is the voice Jesus heard when he came up out of the water of the Jordan River. I want you to hear that voice, too. For you are the body of Christ, and if God loved Jesus on that day in the Jordan River...if God loved Jesus when he preached the sermon on the mount; if God loved Jesus when he was tried by Pilate; if God loved Jesus when he was on the cross; if God loved Jesus when he gave himself for those whom he loved; then God loves the body of Christ now. And you are the body of Christ.

⁴ See Henri Nouwen, "The Life of the Beloved," at www.csec.org/csec/sermon/nouwen.

I want you to hear that voice because we all need to hear it. It still speaks to us. To hear that voice and to claim it as a message for us makes all the difference in the world! It is the difference between living out of guilt and living out of gratitude. It is the difference between acting out of duty and acting out of joy. It is the difference between functioning out of obligation and functioning out of freedom. *You are my Son, my Daughter, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*

That voice tells us who we are, and it tells us that we are beloved.

II

If we are indeed beloved by God, it means some very important things, like this: it means that we are chosen. I don't mean in an exclusive way, as if other people were not also chosen. I mean it in the most inclusive way. God took us from our private lives where we were concerned only for ourselves and those closest to us, and assembled us into a community known as First Baptist Church. God chose us and formed us into "a community of believers who seek to grow in our faith and understanding as we live the Way of Jesus Christ."

In the mystery of God, all are welcome to become part of the chosen. To be chosen means that together, as an assembled community, God has a special

place for us in our generation. God wants to take this community and do wonderful things with it. We are chosen.

But there is more: we are blessed. We are a blessed people, and it is important that you and I recognize that we are blessed. The word “benediction” means blessing. It literally means “good words.” To bless someone means to say good things about them. We all need to know that someone is saying good things about us.

When we greet one another, we are wishing good for each other. It is more than a passing greeting. It is a blessing. We are blessing each other. In the Roman Catholic tradition there is the request, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.” When we pass the peace of Christ, we are enacting the Protestant version of that blessing, for we believe that God’s blessing can come through anyone, not just a priest. We bless one another, for we have all sinned. People need to know that their friends, their family, even strangers sitting near them, can enact a blessing on them. We are blessed!

But there is still more: we are also a wounded people. A lot of our wounds have to do with relationships. If you think of what it is that makes us suffer, usually it involves broken relationships with those we love, with friends, with co-workers, with a partner. Whenever we risk love, we risk pain.

One of our chief tasks in church is to place our wounded-ness and the wounds of those around us under the blessing of God. When you are alone in your wounded-ness, it can destroy your life. It is like an affirmation that you are no good and suddenly you say, "See, I lost my job" or "this friend won't speak to me" or "I have alienated my children" and therefore "I am no good."

One of the great ironies of Christian history is the strange idea that church is a community only for those who have it all put together, who live perfect lives, raise perfect children, who have never broken a promise or a marriage vow or a commitment, who are always happy and never depressed, who are successful in every way. Where would such an idea come from? I don't know. But I do know that from the very beginning church has been a community of the wounded. The great call is to offer our individual and corporate wounded-ness to God and allow God's healing to take place.

We are chosen; we are blessed; we are wounded; but we are also givers. In church we are reminded that one of the greatest satisfactions of life is to give of ourselves. Quite often we hear someone say something like, "I will give of myself when I get myself straightened out...when I get my own problems solved...when I have more time...then I will give of myself."

But here we learn that even wounded people who are chosen and blessed are able to give of themselves. Here we are reminded that even

people who have long ago died are still giving, for we are the recipients of their blessing. Even the memories of those who have lived and blessed us in the past continue to bless us in the present.

III

Like many of you, I continue to be blessed by the ministry and friendship of Gordon Torgersen. Unlike some of you, I was not here when he was pastor, but my wife and I had the privilege of getting to know him and his wife Margaret in their retirement home in Florida. Those visits and the time spent with them remain a great blessing to us.

I was reading one of his sermons this week as I was preparing this sermon. In his sermon he told about a woman in her sixties who came to him with a problem. Her children were all grown and had their own families. Her husband had died and left her with enough to live comfortably. But her problem was that she no longer felt needed. Her three children no longer turned to her for help. Her husband was gone. Now, it seemed to her, she was important to no one. She was living in the midst of plenty but living in misery.

What do we say to someone who feels useless, no longer needed? Listen to the words of Gordon Torgersen: "With all the hard realism I know, I have to say, 'God needs you!' If there is anything our cruel world is making us

aware of it is that goodness needs champions: truth needs voices: honor needs embodiment.”⁵

Those words of Gordon Torgersen blessed me this week as I thought of the blessing Jesus heard: *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.* And I thought of us, this community of faith, as chosen, blessed, wounded, but full of giving.

IV

Julie Pennington-Russell is pastor of the First Baptist Church of Decater, GA. In a book about baptism she tells about serving a church in San Francisco, where she met a woman named Marion. She described Marion as in her early 60's, who had lived about as hard a life as one can imagine. She had left an abusive marriage and had lived homeless on the streets for a long time. She grappled with mental illness, and she was anything but refined in her language and behavior. Julie wrote that Marion started attending church, and eventually asked to be baptized.

When the day arrived for her baptism service, it was a bitter, stormy January day. To make things worse, the old cast-iron baptistery heater, which dated back to 1906, gave up the ghost and could not be resurrected. So several volunteers hauled countless buckets of hot water up two flights of

⁵ Anne T. Goff (ed.), *Sermons of Gordon M. Torgersen* (published by Anne Torgersen Goff, 2009), p. 196.

stairs to try to warm the baptistery. Marion insisted she still wanted to be baptized that day.

When the time came for the baptism, the congregation was reverently quiet as Julie Pennington-Russell entered the water. Then Julie turned and motioned for Marion to follow her into the water. Marion put one toe into the cold water and broke the reverent quietness with a howl like an injured wolf.

Julie whispered up to her, “Marion, is the water too cold for you?” And Marion bellowed back, “Hell, yes, it’s too cold!” Still, she came down into the water slapping at her arms to warm herself. Julie steered her to the right spot in the baptistery and asked, “Marion, who is your Lord and Savior?” Marion looked at the pastor as though she were an idiot and said, “Well Jesus, of course, who else?” Julie said that she lowered Marion into the water thinking that this was a fiasco.

But when Marion came up out of the water she had tears in her eyes. Her chin quivered, and she said in a voice that all could hear: “I feel like a brand new penny.” Julie wrote about that experience, and she said that at that moment “I could almost hear the voice of God whisper over that prickly, sandpaper life: *Marion, you are my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased.*⁶

⁶ Julie Pennington-Russell, “Newness of Life,” in Walter B. Shurden (ed.), *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Press, 1999), pp. 35-36.