

1 Epiphany C

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God's Report Card

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Symphony conductor and teacher Benjamin Zander had a problem. It was a problem he'd been experiencing for the 25 years he'd been teaching. A problem he had with students, especially in his graduate class at the New England Conservatory. The class he was teaching was the art of music performance, and even though Ben had promised his graduate students that if they regularly attended and participated in this class they would make major breakthroughs in their music making and in their lives, he kept running up against the same obstacle. His students were so anxious and preoccupied with the measurement of their performance and their grade that they were afraid to fail and were therefore reluctant to take the risks. This frustrated Ben and was not a healthy situation for his students academically, professionally, or personally. He decided he wanted to change the situation in a way that removed the anxiety and fear so that his students felt empowered to apply themselves and try new things. Ben consulted his wife, Roz, a family therapist, and together they came up with a simple solution to Ben's problem. Since the students were ultimately so worried about their grades, Ben and his wife decided Ben would give all his students an A from the start.

This might be a startling idea to college and university administrators, professors and students, but please hear me out.

When Ben told his class they were all getting A's, he had no idea how both he and his students would grow far beyond anyone's expectations. Getting an A did not mean his students could just skip class, because they didn't need to work to get such a high grade. Instead Ben explained his reasoning to his students, telling them that an A student is someone who works hard because they want to be prepared and they want to contribute, they want to succeed. True preparation, true success, he said, isn't really about a grade, it is about the work a person does. And he was telling his students he was giving them all A's because he believed they were already A students, they were willing to work hard, they were willing to try new things, they were willing to do what it takes to take their music making to the next level. In his eyes they'd already earned an A, now all they had to do for the next two semesters was work together and learn from each other.

The transformation that followed was nothing less than a beautiful epiphany. For starters, Ben's students told him how they looked forward to and enjoyed attending his class. They reported feeling light and happy as they walked toward the door of the classroom every Friday. And Ben reported feeling the same. The relationship between Ben and his students developed into a collegial style, because they were able to trust each other and were honest with one another. The students reported that not only did they gain the confidence necessary to perform well in public, they saw themselves in a new, more positive light, where they now saw themselves as valued and therefore capable of more than they had ever imagined. You can read more about this remarkable way of seeing challenges and dealing with problems in life in the book Ben and his wife Roz co-authored called *The Art of Possibility*.

The idea of giving an A to someone before they've even tried to accomplish something reminds me of the Baptism of Jesus, which the Church always honors the first Sunday after the Feast of the Epiphany, and we heard about in Luke's Gospel. The Synoptic Gospels all record that at Jesus' baptism, the heaven's opened up, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descended on Jesus and that Voice said the words: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Those words have always gotten my attention. Maybe because they are spoken by God before Jesus has done anything. He hasn't started his public ministry at this point in Luke's Gospel. He hasn't rounded up his disciples. He hasn't healed anyone. He hasn't told a single parable. He hasn't stood up to the Pharisees. He hasn't had the Last Supper. He hasn't been put on trial. He hasn't been crucified. He hasn't died, nor been resurrected. These events are farther down the road. Yet before any of these things happened, God chose to tell Jesus God is already not only pleased, God is well pleased with him. Sounds to me like God has already given Jesus an A.

Wouldn't it make more sense for God to say those words after Jesus had done something Messiah-like? Isn't that how it is supposed to work? We get praise or validation after we do something someone decides or deems is worthy of praise or validation, don't we? Aren't we proud of our children after they get good grades or get good jobs? Don't we get promoted after we've performed well at work? Don't we get the grade after we've taken the test or handed in the paper? Well, at least it works that way unless we are in Benjamin Zander's music performance class. Ben Zander really changed things up when he decided to give everyone an A right off the bat, without making them try to figure out what they

needed to do to get such a high grade. When Ben just gave everyone an A he changed the rules, now the grade wasn't something to be attained or reached, it was something to live into because it was something they already had.

Which might be what is at the heart of Jesus' baptism, where God not only called Jesus God's beloved Son, but said God was well pleased with him. God was making a statement that God's love and pleasure was nothing Jesus had to earn. God already loved and delighted in Jesus. After hearing those words, Jesus went and lived them, so we all have the possibility of discovering the tearing open of the heavens means God was and is with us in Jesus who shows us God's love isn't something we have to earn, it has already been given freely and abundantly not only to Jesus, but us all; to me and to you. You are God's child, the beloved, with you God is well pleased.

I wonder if we are reminded every year about Jesus' baptism and hear the words, "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased" to help us remember that God already loves us, and that means God has already given all of us an A.

I'm sure we are all well aware that being baptized or being a Christian isn't magic; it doesn't protect us from the difficulties, troubles, or tragedies of life. Knowing God loves us doesn't guarantee us an easy life any more than Ben Zander's students were promised an easy class just because they got an A. What we are promised is that God loves us, God is with us, and we are empowered to choose God and God's love in every situation we find ourselves in. What might it look like if we remembered we are God's beloved more often?

How would we treat each other if we remembered we are God's beloved with whom God is well pleased and so is everyone else? Would we be more patient, understanding, and compassionate? Would we more willing to speak out for the person who is being abused or persecuted or treated poorly? Would be more willing to share what we have? If we started every day remembering we are God's Beloved with Whom God is Well Pleased how would we use our free time? If we started every day remembering we are God's beloved with whom God is well pleased how would we go about our work? If we remembered we are God's beloved with whom God is well pleased how would we interpret the past? If we remembered we are God's beloved with whom God is well pleased would we try new ways of ministering to the needs of our community? What might coming to church feel like if we remembered we God's child with whom God is well pleased?

I know someone who was struggling with his job; he absolutely hated it, especially because his boss has a different set of values than he does. He felt trapped and unhappy. However, after being reminded by his priest about being God's beloved with whom God is well pleased in a sermon she preached, this man began to change how he engaged his boss. For starters, he wrote: "You are God's beloved with whom God is well pleased" on a piece of tape and put it on his computer monitor at work so he could look at any time he needed. Then he began to see his boss in a more compassionate way, he found ways to communicate that were helpful, and he learned to let go of things his boss said that he didn't need to hold onto. He stopped trying to control his boss or get his boss to do things his way, and saw more possible ways to show his boss his values without interfering with projects that needed to be done. He found a way to respect and work with his boss, despite their differences. Today he is a happier worker, all because he remembered he is God's beloved, with whom God is well pleased, that God has already given him an A.

So it could be with all of us. Any time we face challenges large or small as individuals in our relationships, families, work or school; or as a parish we can so easily forget who we are and choose despair or anger; fear or anxiety. But we don't have to. We can remember we are God's beloved with whom God is well pleased and choose God's love as a way to respond. We don't have to fear failing, because God loves you. You are God's child, the beloved, with you God is well pleased, God has already given you an A, so we are free to live into that abundant generous powerful love of God.