

Baptism of our Lord January 10, 2021

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## Revealing God's Love

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There are many interesting, provocative, and spiritually comforting concepts in the 2007 novel *The Shack* by William Young. That's probably why it was on *The New York Times' Best Seller* list for three years. For those of you unfamiliar with this book, which was made into a movie in 2017, it's about a man named Mack who is struggling mentally and spiritually after the tragic kidnaping and murder of his young daughter. His help comes from an invitation signed "Papa" to come to the shack where the murder happened. Papa, it turns out, is God and Mack ends up spending a weekend with the Trinity: God the Father (Papa), God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. While some people have criticized the author for things like presenting God the Father as a Black woman, others found this representation inviting and helpful. Despite the criticism it received, *The Shack* is a story that has helped millions of people work through pain, tragedy, abuse, and loss and has helped people renew and strengthen their relationships with God.

One of my favorite aspects of the book is when Mack was talking with Papa and would tell Papa about someone who annoyed or bothered him. Papa would listen and respond by repeating the person's name and saying, "I'm terribly fond of that one." As Mack's conversations with Papa grew deeper, and Mack talked about the people who had hurt him, Papa responded the same way, mentioning the name of the person and repeating the phrase, "I'm terribly fond of that one."

As the story progresses, we come to realize no matter who a person is, or what they have done, God always professed to be "terribly fond" of them. This remained true even when Mack talked about the man who murdered his child. In a world full of stories of vengeance and anger, this perpetual fondness of God, especially in the face of the broken sinfulness of humanity, can be difficult to comprehend or accept. In the novel, it was important for Mack to learn and understand that God not only loved him, but God also loves everyone. Only then could Mack begin to heal. This love of God for us all is the heart of the Good News of Jesus Christ in the Gospels, including the part of Mark's Gospel we read today. And this expressed fondness of God may be what we need more than anything today in a wounded world in need of healing.

Today is the first Sunday in the Season of Epiphany, the time between the celebration of Christmas and the penitential season of Lent. Traditionally, Epiphany is a time the Church gives us to reflect on the revelation of who Jesus is. The first Sunday in Epiphany always has a Gospel lesson about Jesus's baptism, because this event reveals a lot about who Jesus is.

The obvious revelation is that Jesus is God's Son, the beloved, and that God is well pleased or delighted in him. This revelation also might make us wonder if Jesus is God's Son, the one John the Baptist spoke about being more important than him, why Jesus would choose to be baptized by John. John's baptism, we read in Mark's Gospel, was a baptism of forgiveness, of washing people clean from their sins. Why would the Son of God participate in such a baptism? Wouldn't he be exempt or above such messiness just by the nature of who he is?

That Jesus chose to share this baptism of forgiveness is a theologically significant and spiritually powerful revelation. Jesus's choice and action shows as God's Son he does not choose to stand apart from humanity, but as God Incarnate, as the Word made flesh, chooses to be one with humanity. Jesus doesn't shy away from our messiness or sinfulness. That doesn't mean he endorses sin but is willing to share the pain and suffering our sinful choices and actions cause while at the very same time, as God's Son both human and divine, reminds us God's intention for humanity wasn't for us to harm each other, but was for us to share in God's loving delight in the world and each other. Jesus's baptism is his first step in restoring humanity to loving relationship with God, to heal the divide caused by sin, and to dispel the misconception that God is angry and vengeful and delights in taking that anger out on us.

As Jesus rose from the waters of baptism, the Holy Spirit descended not in a symbol of anger or power - there is no lightening, no swords - but as a dove, a symbol of love. And Jesus heard a voice speak words of love, words that expressed delight in Jesus, perhaps even in how Jesus' baptism began that restoration of God with humanity. There is no evidence of anger or vengeance in God in this moment. The divide between heaven and earth was removed and no wrath poured out. But God's love rained down in Spirit and light and words. Through Jesus' baptism God is revealed as deeply in love with humanity and delighted to be so close to us once again. God, it seems, really is "terribly fond" of us.

Scholars and commentators like N.T. Wright tell us through our own baptisms we are baptized with Jesus in his death and his resurrection. This means when God sees us, God sees us for who we are, for all we are, all our deep complexities, and sees us

through who we are in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. These scholars remind us the words God spoke at Jesus' baptism are therefore words God speaks at our baptism, even if we don't audibly hear them: that we are God's Child, that we are God's beloved, and God is delighted in us.

For so many, these words can be difficult to hear, much less accept. Especially if they have not had many earthly examples of Christ like love. During my ministry, I'm often surprised by how some people will resist the love of God, often stubbornly telling me how God is at worst an angry vengeful monster and at best a concept that cannot care but are so starved for love they seek it in places that aren't really loving. They will easily believe a celebrity they admire but never met loves them. Or a politician who says what they like loves them, even though they've never spent any personal time with them. Others move through multiple failed romantic relationships thinking they just haven't met the right person who can fill the emptiness they feel or that sentiment of love alone will suffice. Others seek love through positions of wealth or power, only to discover such ambitions only leave them wanting more, always hungry, always thirsty, and never refreshed.

So, it's no wonder there were people who listened to the words of the president this past week and misunderstood his words as the love they crave, and were motivated to do harm. As I understand it, a few even believed what they were doing was God's will, or at least the will of an angry, vengeful god. It's one of the biggest temptations to cast God in our image, especially when we are hurt, angry, disappointed, and believe God wants us to resort to violence to get our way. But as tempting as this mindset is, it doesn't reflect the Gospel. It doesn't reveal the Love of God in Christ.

It is also easy to fall into the temptation to condemn not the behavior but the people who participated in the violence of the riot and to become lost in anger and desire vengeance for the fear, hurt, and pain we might be feeling. It's important to condemn behavior, all of us are responsible for our words and behaviors and need to be held accountable, especially when that behavior is breaking laws and causing intentional harm. But before we go so far as to dehumanize people, perhaps it's important to pause and remember they are also beloved children of God, and God is "terribly fond" of them, even if we aren't.

This in no way endorses destructive, abusive, harmful behaviors. As Jesus showed, being loved by God does not mean we can do whatever we want, that our words and actions don't have consequences, that our sins don't matter. As we can

see, choosing to sin still causes suffering in body, mind, and spirit and is the antithesis of love. As followers of Jesus, we are to strive to behave in ways that show the selfless love of God in Christ.

The reminder that God loves the people we don't, the people we don't understand, accept, or like, even the ones who hurt us or others is the deep reminder we are all connected. It is also the reminder that as God's beloved, we can be intentional to respond to any situation in ways that reveal God's love in Christ. That our very lives are intended by God to show God's love to the world, to remind people God is "terribly fond" of them.

If we were meeting in person today, after this sermon, we would renew our baptismal vows instead of reciting the Nicene Creed. It's how we start the Season of Epiphany by remembering our faith isn't just words we recite, they are actions that those words inspire and describe. Perhaps you might want to go over the Renewal of the Baptismal Vows on page of the Book of Common Prayer and pay attention if any part of the vows or word jumps out at you. That is usually an indication of the Holy Spirit reaching out to you.

Since we aren't renewing our baptismal vows in person, today I want to remind you of the Way of Love, the Episcopal Church's attempt to put our belief into practice. The Way of Love is summarized in seven words: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Rest, Go. Turn is the reminder to turn toward God who is Love and away from that which isn't God, to love God. Learn can be summed up in this Mr. Rogers quote, "A love of learning comes from learning we are loved." Learn isn't just the reminder to study scripture and commentaries to learn the ability to discern what is of God. It is practicing the love of learning, and the more we learn about God through scriptures, the more we can learn God is love and loves us. Pray is to be in conversation with God in its many diverse expressions. Worship is the practice of giving yourself to God, to praise God. Rest is the practice of letting go, to find ways to renew your soul, body, mind, and heart. Go is the call to go out and observe the world, seeking God who is already present and seeking opportunities to show and share God's love with the world. Bless is the opportunity to dispel some of the hate and anger in the world by showing God's love. In a statement by our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry this past week, he encouraged us all to give blessings to everyone. To bless the person who voted differently than we did. To bless our neighbors. To bless our friends, co-workers, students, children, care takers. To bless them all by speaking words of kindness, or a helping action. A phone call, note in

the mail, email, text message, just being a listening presence, so many little ways we can bless others and in so doing be a blessing in the world. That's how healing can begin.

One of the revelations of this past week and in today's Gospel is how important words are. Words can lead to love and healing and words can incite anger and lead to harm. Maybe this revelation can encourage us to take the seven words of the Way of Love to heart and put them into its practice in our lives and in the church. If it sounds daunting or challenging, or if you aren't sure you want to let go of those feelings of anger, disappointment, or fear yet, maybe you just need this reminder: You are God's child. You are beloved by God and in you, God is well pleased. God is terribly fond of you.

Imagine what the world would be like if we all believed this and lived the Way of Love and inspired others to live it too. That's a world where things like hunger, poverty, oppression, discrimination, and hatred could all be summed up in one word: past. That's a world that would make room for all God's beloved children to grow and thrive together. Maybe you think it can't happen. And the truth is it won't if no one tries. But what if we let go of cynicism and tried living the Way of Love? God's love might be shared one word one day at a time until real change takes root and the fruit of living the Way of Love starts to reveal itself. A world where we bless instead of dehumanizing each other. A world where we heal instead of harming each other. A world where all that love reveals God in our midst. It can happen. Because it all begins in God's healing, holy, generous, audacious love for you, for me, for everyone.