



In the Beginning, Love. In the End, Love.

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

The First Sunday after the Epiphany, the Baptism of Jesus

Matthew 3:13-17

I'm going to ask you all a question, and I want you to answer it only within yourself. When have you experienced most fully being loved?

Let me ask you another question. When have you experienced most fully loving?

I'm guessing all of you had some mix of poignant joy and grief, sadness and fulfillment, the knowledge that human love in all its beauty and complication is a messy powerful thing. There is the love a child receives from parents. That love is imperfect. Some kids know they are loved and wanted; they never doubt it. Some kids experience that their parents really did not want them, and they carry that grief within them forever. Some people have had the love of their lives; the truly fortunate ones get to be committed to the love of their lives for a long time. Some people have had a series of best effort relationships that achieve varying levels on the spectrum of love and need. Some people have never had a satisfying romantic relationship. Some people have wonderful relationships with their kids, and sometimes we do our best to love our kids but they grow up and make mistakes and become estranged. And there is the love of the greater whole, the love of knowing we are all connected and seeking to do no harm because each living thing is so sacred; at our best, we know this and are guided by it; and maybe just as often we are what Martin Luther called *Incurvatus in se*, curved in on ourselves and only self-referential, so that we don't perceive the degree of our true

connection with all others and so we act in ways that unintentionally create damage around us. Human love is powerful, and messy.

In today's reading from Matthew's gospel, Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan. Each of the gospels tells the story a little differently. And for some reason, this year when I sank deeply into this story, I saw something for the first time about love. Matthew's gospel is the only one that begins with the story of Joseph. Joseph is engaged to Mary when much to his deep distress he finds out she is pregnant. His first instinct is that he can't continue with her, but doesn't want to disgrace her so he plans to divorce her quietly. An angel comes and explains that this thing is from the Holy Spirit, so he should go forward with it – and being who he was, he agrees.

But what I wonder is about the part of the story that the gospels don't tell. What was Joseph's relationship with Jesus? One might say that Jesus was an illegitimate child. Did Joseph ever really fully embrace Jesus as his son? Was there distance between them? Did Jesus grow up not certain whether the dad figure in his family really loved him? We focus a lot on Jesus as the Son of God, and that's important. But it's just as important, maybe for our purposes sometimes even more important, to realize Jesus was as human as we are. I'm imagining a scenario where Joseph was a good man, and that he did love Jesus. But I wonder whether they had the same relationship that they would have had if Mary had gotten pregnant after they got married.

So here, this pivotal moment in the life of Jesus, this time before Jesus begins his public ministry—a liminal time of transition—Jesus comes to his cousin John, the cousin who was totally legitimate, and asks to be baptized.

What did that mean to Jesus, to John, to the people around them? Jews of most branches were used to using water for rituals of purification, so that

one who had been made unclean through some sin or taboo could be restored to the community. John the Baptizer proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It seems that Jesus wanted to take part in this ritual, the gospel doesn't say why except that John argued with him about it. But I am so moved by what actually happens when Jesus is baptized. The gospel says that Jesus saw the heavens open and the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And he hears a voice from heaven say "You are my Son, the Beloved. I am so very pleased with you."

This is before Jesus had done anything at all in public ministry. No teachings. No miracles. No fame. This is the very first thing that happens; it's in a sense Jesus' initiation to public ministry. And God calls Jesus God's child, Beloved, that God is pleased with him not because of what he has accomplished, but because of who he is. No matter how Jesus' human father figure loved him, God claimed him as God' Son, and God's love was irrevocable, overwhelming, and complete.

At this important moment in Jesus life that is both a beginning and also an end, that which is incomplete in his experience of human love is healed. In a certain sense, he is reborn in the water of the river.

We love each other and we do our very best. But our love is not perfect. We fail each other. We carry the stories and scars of loving and a lack of love throughout our lives, and sometimes without meaning to we enact our own wounds on other people. What God is doing here is making sure that when Jesus comes to be initiated, to be forgiven, to be made whole, he is indeed made whole. But I'm not so sure it's by being cleansed, as it is by being loved.

In the end of Jesus' childhood, there is love. In the beginning of his public ministry, love. The love of God that catches human love up into it and completes it. The God who calls you Beloved Child, when your own parents just couldn't give that to you even though they might have done their best. The God who calls you Beloved even when you didn't love your own children perfectly. The God who loves without reference to accomplishments or mistakes. The God who catches each one of us up into that love and heals what we have done and what has been done to us. The God who is especially present to us in times of transition—when something is ending and something else beginning, there especially, God calls us Beloved.

I need that God. In the beginning, love. In the end, love. In all the messy in between imperfections, love. This love is required for us to do the hard work to which God calls us. All the wisdom and resources in the world will not adequately prepare us, because in the end we will do our work imperfectly. In our birth, in our growing and maturing, in our working and seeking justice and reconciliation and shalom for all people everywhere, in our aging, and in our dying too, we are called Beloved. What if we really believed this?

In Christian tradition we are baptized, most of us when we were babies. This baptism is intended to be a rite of initiation in which we become members of Christ's body, the church. In our baptisms we make promises: to continue in the apostles' teaching, fellowship and prayer, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to respect the dignity of every human being, to strive for justice and peace among all people. What if these promises ought properly to be seen as our response to being Beloved—the radical courage to live differently because we have this foundation? God has seen us, and has said an unqualified Yes. We see God, and we dare to believe that we are loved, and we say yes right back.

In times of transition perhaps you will look back at your past and look ahead at your future. And perhaps you will see that there was not a perfect love there. You might mourn the losses of what never was, and what you were not able to give. You will hope for something different going forward, and you will do your very best. And through all of that, God says, You are my Child, the Beloved. With you I am so very pleased. You can believe this. Because you believe it you can dare to live differently. In the economy of God's salvation, where the love of God heals all that is broken, you can be an agent of love in this world. You can participate in God's work to create the Beloved Community.

Let's sit in silence for a minute or so and simply receive the love of God where love has been incomplete in our lives. Then I invite you to consider how believing this might change the way you live. Amen.