

Diandra and Ella Mae Gould Baptism Homily

Epiphany 1B, Feast of the Baptism of Jesus

January 11, 2015

Mark 1: 4 - 11 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

In her book, “*Alone Together*”, MIT professor Sherry Turkle describes her 15 years of research on the interface between humans and technology. Her research shows that people today report feeling simultaneously *more connected* **and lonelier** than ever before.¹

Commenting on Turkle’s research, Lutheran professor David Lose writes, “One of the things I’m struck by in today’s culture is the [presence everywhere] of *affirmation*. Facebook gives us the chance to ‘like’ movies or books or posts and to have things *we* write or post ‘liked’ by our ‘friends’ in return. Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram invite us to collect thousands of ‘followers,’ ‘fans,’ or ‘friends,’ most of whom we’ve never met... Ads are increasingly personalized, targeting our particular tastes and creating the impression that we are the most important customer in the world...

"One of the reasons I think digital platforms, and social media in particular, are powerful," Dr. Lose continues, "is precisely because they creatively offer *affirmation* in plentiful doses. Deep down, of course, we know that this kind of affirmation doesn't *mean* all that much. Or at least shouldn't. Many of the folks we encounter via the web, after all, don't really know us and we don't know them, so how can their 'likes' ... create any **enduring** sense of value or worth? ...

“We crave that recognition and interaction because we are, at heart, inherently *social* people. Almost every element of our being reflects God’s observation in Genesis that it is not good for us to be alone, and so the affirmation... social media offers creates the perception that we are linked to so many others – indeed, that we are surrounded by a community of like-minded, and like-able, people that value us.”² Holy Baptism, on the other hand, proclaims each baptized person a living, integral member of an organically **real**, Spirit-infused community called

the Body of Christ, the family of God, in which we are **accepted** at the deepest level of our being.

And *acceptance* is very **different** from *affirmation*... “Acceptance,” Dr. Lose notes, “is not the same as ‘fitting in.’ Indeed, it is its exact opposite. For while fitting in – the skill we learned most keenly in adolescence but keep sharp into adulthood – is all about changing yourself so as to be found suitable to your peer group, *acceptance* is simply and crucially being accepted and valued just as you are.”

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River. He hasn't *started* his ministry yet, hasn't called his disciples, hasn't **done** anything, so far as we know, to earn him praise from God or human being. Yet, just as he is coming up out of the waters, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice comes from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” “Wrapped in these words of acceptance are the blessings of identity, worth, and unwavering regard.” (*ibid.*) I don't have to tell you how important these things are for any *one* of us, but especially for a child growing up. And that is exactly what we proclaim by word and action today: that in Baptism, God says to Diandra and to Ella Mae, as He did to Jesus, “You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased.” It is a divine proclamation of deep **acceptance** that is as far in type and degree from the often faceless **affirmations** of social media as you can get. And it is SO important for us to hear and to claim God's acceptance as beloved – to hear and claim it for ourselves, our friends and family, and – especially on their baptismal day – for Diandra and Ella Mae.

Disciples of Christ preacher and professor Fred Craddock tells of a time about 40 years ago when, desperately needing a break from his work, he returned to his home state of Tennessee for a short vacation with his wife. One night they found a quiet restaurant. While they were waiting for their meal they saw a distinguished white-haired man moving from table to table visiting guests. Craddock whispered to his wife, “I hope he doesn't come over here.”

But the man *did* come to his table. “Where are you folks from?” “Oklahoma.” “Splendid state. What do you do for a living?” “I teach preaching.” “Oh, so you teach preachers to preach. Well I've got a story for you.” Dr. Craddock groaned inwardly. And with that the man pulled up a chair and sat down at the table.

The man stuck out his hand, “I'm Prentice Cooper. I was born not far from here. My mother wasn't married when I was born, [and in Tennessee in those years that meant] I had a hard time. My classmates had a name for me, and it wasn't very nice. What was worse was going downtown on Saturday afternoon and feeling the eyes of all the people there burning a hole through my heart. They were all wondering who my *real* father was.

When I was 12 years old a new preacher came to our church. I would always go in late and slip out early, so as not to be noticed. But one day the preacher said the benediction so fast I got caught and had to walk out with the crowd. I could feel every eye in the church on me. Just about the time I got to the door I felt a big hand on my shoulder. I looked up – and the preacher was looking right at me. “Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?” I felt the old familiar weight come on me. Even the preacher was putting me down! But as he looked down at me, studying my face, he began to smile a big smile of recognition. “Wait a minute,” he said, “*I* know who you are. I see the family resemblance. You are a son of God.” With that he slapped me across the back and said, “Boy you’ve got an inheritance; go and claim it!”

The old man looked across the table at Fred Craddock and said, “That was the single most important sentence ever said to me.” With that he smiled, shook the hands of Craddock and his wife, and moved on to another table to greet friends. Suddenly Fred Craddock remembered. On two occasions the people of Tennessee had elected as their governor a man who had been born out of wedlock. His name was Prentice Cooper.

The waters of our baptism are like that for us. For in the baptismal waters, we are inextricably linked, through Christ, with God. And with the identity which is revealed to us as son or daughter of God also comes the attendant responsibilities, to which we will commit, or re-commit, in a few moments, as we promise or renew baptismal vows. By age 12, Prentice Cooper had already experienced his 40 years in the wilderness. But he had yet to learn of his true birthright – he knew nothing of the Promised Land beyond the Jordan. When that new preacher told the young Cooper he was a son of God with an inheritance to claim, Cooper did so – he crossed his Jordan River – and became a public servant, eventually Governor of the State of Tennessee. But it all started with that most important sentence anyone had ever said to him: “Boy, you’ve got an inheritance; go and claim it!” (*source lost*)

Diandra and Ella Mae, I mentioned earlier the research that shows that people today, in your generation, report feeling simultaneously *more connected and lonelier* than ever before. As helpful as social media can be, it often offers only *affirmations* and “likes”, rather than **acceptance** and **love**. Today at your baptisms, there will be a voice from heaven speaking not to your ears, but to your hearts, saying to each of you, “You are my daughter, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Profound love and acceptance for each of you, proclaimed by the One who created you, who knit you together in your mother’s womb. And you will be joined not to a *virtual* community, but to the living Body of Christ in this world, the One, Holy, Catholic and apostolic Church, and to that part of it which *we* are, here at Christ Church. You are God’s beloved daughters, with whom He is well pleased; and in Holy Baptism you have an inheritance in Christ. Go claim it!

AMEN

¹Turkle, Sherry, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2012

²Lose, David, "...in the Meantime" blog, Jan. 5, 2015,
<http://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/baptism-of-our-lord-b/>