



**A Sermon from Dr. Jody Seymour, Senior Pastor
Davidson United Methodist Church
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The Sermon Text: Mark 1:4-11

You Are Mine

Will Willimon tells the story of a parent who was very upset with what his son did and told his child he would be punished for such a thing, to which the child responded, “You can’t touch me; I’m baptized.”


That reminds me of something I tried on my mother as a child. The doctor told my mother that, because of health issues, she would never be able to have children. It seems I was a surprise when I came that first year of her marriage. One day I too did something that merited punishment and when she threatened the required spanking, I boldly told her, “But remember momma, I’m your little miracle.” She looked at me and walked away. I felt rescued by the blessing of being a “miracle.” (You need to know that only worked one time. The next time I tried it, the blessing it seems had expired. Her little miracle got a spanking.) The blessing did not remove one from responsibility.

Today is one of my favorite Sundays, the Baptism of the Lord Sunday. This is a day when we remember a special blessing that God offers to us in baptism. Each year, this Sunday comes near the beginning of our calendar year. It is good that it does because the blessing does not remove us from the responsibility to own up to our actions. When we remember Jesus’ own baptism, it helps us remember who we are and how much God wants us to hear what Jesus hears when he is baptized that day in the muddy waters of the Jordan. A voice from heaven says to Jesus, “You are my beloved. You are mine.” Jesus receives the divine blessing and today I offer you and me a chance to again receive and remember that same blessing. Today I want you to hear that you are claimed by God. You are chosen. You are God’s beloved child.

That is one of the reasons Jesus stands in line for us. Jesus does not need to receive John’s baptism, but he does so because he wants to identify with us. He wants to literally stand with us in our joys and in our sorrows.

John Donne wrote a reflection on Jesus standing in the Jordan waiting to be baptized by John in his poem, “Standing in the Mud”:

The mud of human evil
Is very deep
It stinks forcefully
It is full of dangerous gases,
And there was Jesus,
In front of John,



Asking to be allowed
To bend down in that mud.
And John,
No wonder hesitated.

But he, Jesus
He went down,
And when he came up,
The mud still streaming
Heaven opened,
And a voice was heard...
And a new Spirit
A new life
And a new heart
Were announced,
Glory, glory alleluia
He was bathed in light...
Drowned in Gods' voice...
Full of spirit;
 But what about the mud,
 Was he going to forget it?
 No
Because once he got the spirit,
That Spirit drove him..
 To do his work
 In this world,
 To struggle with evil in us
 In this world,
 In order to overcome it.

Jesus stands with us in the mud of life. Why? Because God says to those who would come to the waters, "You are mine. I chose to be with you in all of life. I call you to be my beloved."

In the movie, "Schindler's List," Nazi guards try to take some of the Jews off to the death camps. It is Oscar Schindler who saves their lives by bribing the guards with money to convince them that he must run his factory with these workers who happen to be Jews. When they want to take his workers, he reminds them that they cannot because, "these are mine." He has a prior claim on them. Oscar Schindler ransoms over 1,100 Jewish lives by claiming that "they are his."

God has a prior claim on you. Baptism is the sign of that claim. All children of God are God's children. Baptism is no more a ticket to heaven than a wedding is the assurance of a good marriage, but in baptism God reminds us that we do not belong to the world. In baptism when parents bring children to the font, they are in fact saying that their children are not really their children; they are given to them by God on loan.



Vows are said by parents as an acknowledgement of this reality. We make the promise because God first promises us a truth that, if we listen carefully, we just might hear the heavens speak at the moment of baptism: “This one is mine.”

You notice in Mark’s gospel there are no shepherds or Wise Men. For Mark, the birth of the faith begins not in Bethlehem, but in the muddy waters of the Jordan River. We do not hear of an angel announcing the good news, nor do we hear of a virgin birth. This leads some scholars and even some in the early Christian church to believe that Jesus is “adopted” by God that day at the Jordan.

This early view is rejected later by the church and the stories of the virgin birth and angel announcements win out, but for today I want us to at least hold up this other idea as a way to remember that we are adopted at our baptism. You have heard adoption stories of how some children are made to feel bad because “they are adopted,” but the contrary truth can be professed by an adopted child when he or she can say to other children, “Hey listen, your parents had you; my parents chose me.”

You are chosen. As I was preparing these thoughts, a voice from the past echoed in my Jordan valley. It comes from a children’s musical and the words came bouncing in my head. I remember my pig-tailed girls singing a song from, “Down by the Creek Bank.” The song is “I am Adopted” and in it the children boldly sing out these words:

I am adopted, I’m a special kid you see
There’s room in his big kingdom for a million kids like me
He loves the little children, you can bet that can be
So come on up to my father’s house and join our family
I’m adopted, I’m children, I bear my father’s name
Just living a life of luxury in a castle with the king.

Today we need to remember this special blessing we call baptism. You hear me all the time say that we are blessed by God, not to keep or possess the blessing, but we are blessed that we might be a blessing to others and the world. Well, it begins here at the baptismal font. God says to the world, “You can’t have this one; he or she is mine.”

Henry Nouwen, a monk, recounts a moment when he was working with a group of mentally challenged adults. One of them, Janet, came up to Henry and said, “Bless me, Henry.” It was during a worship service and Henry did not quite know what to do, so he made the sign of the cross in front of her and said, “Bless you, Janet.”

Janet looked strangely at him and said, “No, Henry. I want a real blessing.” He prayed quickly because he never really understood what was going on in the minds of these people who thought differently than most folks, so in that moment Henry Nouwen reached out and hugged Janet and then he looked into her eyes and said, “Janet, you are so special. You are so good. Your smile brings light to all our lives.”



Janet smiled and hugged Henry right back. Of course, after this many more of those special adults came up and said, "Henry, I want a blessing, too." Slowly, he embraced each of them and said words of affirmation. At the end there stood one of the caretakers - a big, tall tough man who at times had to handle those adults who became unmanageable. He came up to Henry and looked down at him and said, "Bless me, too, Henry."

We all need the blessing and baptism as a reminder that we are God's beloved. But to be baptized means that we are to be a blessing. When Jesus comes up out of the muddy waters of the Jordan, he goes forth into the wilderness to listen for his marching orders. His baptism commissions him for his task. It will not be easy. He is the one who announces that he comes to bring good news to the poor, to liberate the oppressed, to give sight to the blind, to bring new life to those who are captive. And you thought all that we were doing at this font was a sweet ceremony to show off a baby! This is a powerful moment in which we acknowledge God's claim upon our lives.

Last Sunday, I reminded all of us that if we respond to God's covenant offer that we will at times have to deny ourselves to follow Christ. We will have to do some things that we would not normally do if we accept this blessing of baptism and God's call upon our lives.

I listened to Tony Compolo this week tell a story he calls, "A birthday party for a prostitute at 3:30 in the morning." It seems he was in a town out west and the time change made him get up at 3:30 in the morning. He found a greasy spoon restaurant near the motel where he was staying. Tony ended up going to the restaurant a few of the mornings he was there. He got to know the owner and cook, Harry - who was a rough looking guy with grease all over his shirt and apron.

At 3:30 every morning, a group of prostitutes came roaring in for coffee. Harry knew all their names. They sat beside Tony and started up a conversation. He heard one of them, whose name was Agnes, say to some of her companions, "Hey, tomorrow is my birthday." They all laughed and said "So what? It's your birthday."

Agnes said, "I just wanted you to know; I wasn't asking for anything." One of the girls said, "So you want a party or something?" "No," she pulled back and responded, "Just forget it."

After they all left, Tony looked up at Harry and said, "Hey Harry, let's have a birthday party for Agnes tomorrow night. I'll get some hats and a cake, and I'll get here early and decorate." Harry rubbed his hand on his dirty apron and reached out to shake Tony's hand. "Hey, you bring some stuff for the decorations and I'll bake the cake, man."

So the next night when they all came in, the place was decorated and Tony held up the cake and started singing "Happy Birthday." Everyone started singing. Agnes was in shock. She had tears in her eyes. Harry offered her a knife and said, "Cut the cake, Agnes." She said, "Do I have to?" "Well, yes it's your cake Agnes." Then she said, "Can I take it to my momma and show it to her? I want her to see that it is my cake."



Tony said, “Well Agnes, its’ your cake you can do whatever you want...but where is your momma?” “She only lives 2 blocks away. Just let me show it to her and I’ll come back and we can cut the cake.” And Agnes, still in a kind of spell, walked out with the cake.

As Tony told this story, he recounted that there was an awkward silence as the rest of them waited on Agnes to return. Tony then said, “Why don’t we pray?” He prayed for Agnes to feel the love of Jesus for her. After everybody left, Harry looked down at Tony and said, “Hey man, you did not tell us you were a preacher.” “I’m not a preacher; I’m a Christian sociologist.” “But do you preach or something?” Harry asked. “Well I have a church back home where I do some preaching.” “What the heck kind of church is that?” He said. “Well,” laughed Compolo, “It’s the kind of church that would throw a birthday party for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.” Harry wrapped Tony on the shoulder, “No you don’t because I would join to a church like that.”

Are we the kind of church that Harry would go to? Are we a church that knows that Agnes is beloved of God? Are we adopted children who know that we are to be a commissioned people who are to help liberate the captives?

Maybe you are one of those captives. Maybe something has claimed you that keeps you from living fully. Maybe you are mired in some of the mud of life as you begin this year.

Today is the day to remember our baptism. That day of Jesus’ baptism, the spirit descended upon him like a dove. The voice called to him and claimed him. You and I are called by God. Lately, because I’m on the Board of Ministry of our District and Conference, I have been listening to a lot of people tell of their call to ministry. It reminds me that the word “call” is the word “vocatio” or “vocation.”

In our culture, we limit that word and make it out to be our “job.” Today I remind you that it is not just ordained ministers who are “called” by God. All of us are claimed and called to be in mission and ministry by God. There is a prior claim on our lives. Before we are named by our parents or choose a profession or a role as mother, father, friend...we are claimed by God. God says in the midst of all the mud, in the midst of all the competing claims, in the midst of all the titles of minister or prostitute, “You are not the world’s; you are mine. You are adopted and chosen.”

Remember your baptism and be grateful. We are blessed to be a blessing. We are blessed to help Jesus offer us liberation that we might be liberators.

(A time of Baptismal renewal is now offered where the people say the baptismal vows that can be found on p. 50 of the United Methodist Hymnal.)