

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Matthew 3:13-17

*<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. <sup>16</sup> And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water; suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

Do you remember your baptism? For some of you, that would be difficult because you were baptized as an infant. I was baptized as an infant and the only reason that I know that is that I found a certificate in the baby book that my mother kept for me. Later, my parents became members of the Church of the Brethren; and that's the faith tradition I have always known.

I was baptized when I was about twelve years old. I don't remember much about that experience. I remember more about the moment I decided that I wanted to be baptized. I was in church on Palm Sunday, and as was the Tradition at Lititz COB, an altar call was given. I remember at that moment, I started to cry. Perhaps my spirit was overcome with emotion by an inner voice reaching out to me—God's voice. It wasn't something I heard, unless the pastor's message said something special to me, but what I remember is more about what I felt. As I think about that moment right now, I'm thinking that when other voices pursue my attention, I should remember that moment, and God's voice tenderly calling me.

We all have "voices" that live in our heads. And it has nothing to do with mental illness or any abnormality about us. We often don't pay much attention to the "conversations" rolling around in our heads. But, when we think, particularly introspectively, we tend to notice them—the passionate voice, the inner child's voice, our "adult" voice, the reflective voice, the critical voice. Ah, now that's the voice we notice more often than any other voice, isn't it? That critical voice that can pound on us in the night, keeping us awake, tossing and turning, and reviewing what we did and didn't do, stopping mercilessly on every perceived mistake we have ever made—or at least the ones we think we made that day.

Those with some form of anxiety experience this more often than others. But every person at one time or another has experienced the disapproving voice of their inner Critic admonishing, doubting, diminishing, pounding.

Psychologists often say that our strongest inner voices are ones we have absorbed or assumed from those of our parents. If we had a particularly critical parent or one that made us feel "less than," we carry that same voice in our heads as an adult, continuing to label ourselves in the very same way.

Likewise, if we had a nurturing, compassionate parent, we may be inclined to comfort ourselves and help ourselves feel better. The world is full of voices. We hear them and we pick and choose which ones we will listen to. There are voices that speak to us almost on a daily basis.

There is the voice of our consumer-based society that demands that we produce more so we can spend more. There are the voices of our peers, social media and the news that entice us to act on values that we know are contrary to our faith and our upbringing.

The voice of advertising tells us what we should buy, what we should eat, what we should expect from others, even what we should think about ourselves. These voices try to convince us that we need all of these things, the more the better, to truly be happy and fulfilled. Yes, wherever we go, we are surrounded by voices.

In truth, our inner world is full of many conversations, some which we willingly absorb and allow to influence us. They can be helpful or hindering our feelings about ourselves! This is why “self-talk” works so well in helping us to force down critical voices in favor of more nurturing ones that we deliberately choose to insert in order to “change the conversation” in our heads!

But no matter how much self-talk we attempt to do, nothing beats God’s talk. Matthew points us in the direction of listening to a voice greater than all other voices. It is the voice that was heard at Jesus’ baptism. It was a voice that sounded foreign amid the other voices that the people were accustomed to hearing. It was a voice that affirmed something few had yet to affirm. It was the voice of a holy parent affirming and revealing to the world the real identity of this holy child, the One being baptized. It said, “This is my Son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased.”

Stop for a moment and just think about this particular voice. This wasn’t just another willy-nilly voice. This is the same voice that spoke creation into being. This is the same voice that called Moses to rescue and lead the Israelites through the wilderness and to the promised land.

This is the same voice that called out prophets, and spoke through them words to instruct, warn and communicate God’s heart to a people who wandered away from God. In Psalm 29:4, the psalmist spoke of this voice, saying: The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty,” saying in essence that if ever there was a voice to be heeded, this, God’s voice, would be that voice.

Jesus, upon his baptism, heard the voice of his Father, communicating His affirmation and love for His one and only Son. We read how Jesus was blessed by His Father and with his Father’s blessing, Jesus received power as he began the mission God laid out before him.

The story of Jesus’ baptism is found in all four Gospels; however, Matthew is the only writer that records the conversation between John the Baptist and Jesus prior to the actual baptism. We find that John was reluctant to baptize Jesus. He felt unworthy to do it. He felt instead that Jesus should be baptizing him. He knew Jesus was special, very special, the Promised Messiah. Indeed, as we all know, Jesus was and continues to be special.

John was calling people to repent; and as a sign of their confession and repentance, he was baptizing them with water, signifying the washing away of the old self and rising to the new self. John’s idea for baptism was not new. It may have emerged out of the Jewish ritual for cleansing by immersion in a mikveh, or ritual bath. It was a form of purification, usually performed more than once in a lifetime.

There was also a Jewish sect called the Essenes of Qumran. They also emphasized ritual purity, using immersion baptism even though they lived in the desert where water supply was extremely limited.

The ritual of baptism was used for Gentiles who sought to convert to Judaism. They were required to undergo the ritual for cleansing as part of their initiation. However, we don’t think that this practice influenced John because evidence of baptism for this reason really did not emerge until years after John was doing it. We just can’t be sure.

So, the people of that day, including the Jews, were familiar with the practice of baptism for purification. People came to be baptized by John because they knew they had messed up at some time, knew they needed to have the ritual for cleansing, and wanted God's forgiveness and salvation. It may sound to us as believers like a simple and harmless step; but it wasn't.

When a person came to be baptized, he or she had to put aside his or her pride. Admitting sinfulness, particularly in a public setting was risky. Observers may view these admissions as a sign of weakness and failure in the one being baptized. Strong, ignorant, judgmental voices attempted to dish out shame and strip one of honor in the community. At that time, any dignified person, especially a man would do anything he could to acquire honor and avoid shame. The truth is it took guts to go to John to get baptized.

While we might be quick to criticize those who allowed pride to get in the way of being baptized, pride has held people back from getting baptized throughout history since those early days.

Jesus really didn't care about any of these earthly anxieties, fears, and pressures. He stepped right up to the opportunity to be baptized. Ironically, he had no sin to confess, but those watching may have wondered what he did that would require him to need purification. Jesus wasn't worried what the people watching would think or how they would judge him when he was baptized along with all sorts of people who had varying degrees of sinfulness. Jesus stood as a brother with those who came, and he set an example for all who were watching.

Prior to his baptism, we read in verse 15 that Jesus said: "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." What did he mean? Jesus wanted everyone then, and he wants us to hear that making things right with God, is important; but being right with God is not only about being obedient to God's law. It also has a lot, if not everything to do with having a personal relationship with God. Jesus did not need to be baptized because he had broken God's law; but because he wanted to express, even make public, his desire to be in relationship with God. As our brother, Jesus encourages us to seek the same.

We read then, that after Jesus was baptized; a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." And with that, Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he began his ministry, according to God's plan.

The voice of our heavenly parent speaks to us too. If we seek God, if we will listen, and because we are not perfect, if we will throw out all the garbage in our lives, including our pride, because it separates us from God, then we can hear the voice of God too, and we can hear him telling us that we are his beloved children. And when we hear this heart-desired blessing from our All-Powerful God, when we embrace all that it means, we too open ourselves to the Holy Spirit's indwelling, and with joy we join our brother, Jesus, in doing the work of spreading God's love through what we do and say. There is power, great power in God's voice, which frees us to love and to be loved.

N.T. Wright, an English New Testament scholar, and author of many books wrote the following: "A famous moviemaker had a huge legal wrangle with his longtime mentor and guide. The younger man simply couldn't handle criticism and ended up rejecting the person who had helped him so much. When it was all over, a close friend summed up the real problem. "It was all about an ungenerous father, and a son looking for affirmation and love."

It happens all the time, in families, businesses, and all over. Many children grow up in our world who have never had a father say to them (either in words, in looks, or in hugs), "You are my dear child, I'm pleased with you." In the Western world, even those fathers who think this in their hearts are often too tongue-tied or embarrassed to tell their children how delighted they

are with them. Many go by the completely opposite route: angry voices, bitter rejection, and the slamming of doors.

The whole Christian gospel could be summed up in this point: when the living God looks at us, at every baptized and believing Christian, he says to us what he said to Jesus on that day. He sees us, not as we are in ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ. It sometimes seems impossible, especially to people who have never had this kind of support from their earthly parents, but it's true: God looks at us, and says, "My dear, dear child; I'm delighted with you." Try saying that sentence slowly, with your own name at the start, and reflect quietly on God saying that to you, both at your baptism and every day since.

"My dear, dear child; I'm delighted with you." Believe it. Amen.