

Epiphany 1, Yr. C

January 13, 2019

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17. 21-22

Using the readings from Isaiah and from Luke, let's look this morning at the profession of God's love, first for Israel and then for Jesus and, because we are also sons and daughters of God, His love for us. What does it mean when God says to each one of us, "You are my beloved"?

We hear that first in the reading from Isaiah – those powerful and beautiful words, which were spoken to a people who were suffering in exile, people who needed reassurance and hope that they hadn't been abandoned. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE AFRAID, God says to them, because I HAVE CREATED YOU, I FORMED YOU FROM THE BEGINNING, I HAVE REDEEMED YOU, I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME, YOU ARE MINE. And then he says that no matter what happens – whether you walk through rivers that threaten to overwhelm you, or through fire – you'll be safe. And why is that, exactly? Why, God says, BECAUSE YOU ARE PRECIOUS IN MY SIGHT AND HONORED, AND I LOVE YOU." Note

that it doesn't say anywhere that there won't be suffering. Instead, it says that that suffering will not overwhelm you because, ultimately, God is with you and will never abandon you.

I know I've told some of you about being at Parkland Hospital in Dallas for part of my seminary training. You may know of it because that's where Kennedy was taken when he was shot. It's the trauma center for the southwest and, as you might imagine, it's a place where pretty much every kind of suffering can be seen. I needed to spend time there as a requirement for ordination, but I wasn't very happy about it – it truly did seem like a place where suffering would be overwhelming. But one day, the director of the chaplaincy program addressed this and said something to the effect that when horrible things happened to people, pretty much everyone wanted to run away and, he said, "If you can stay with people who are suffering and walk with them through that suffering, you will have given them the greatest gift one human being can give another." Not to abandon people in their suffering, but to walk through it with them – that's God's promise to Israel and to us in the Isaiah reading.

And then, in Luke's account of Jesus' baptism, we hear God saying the same thing to Jesus that he said in the Isaiah reading – you are my beloved son. To be the beloved one, to be precious, to be unconditionally loved. How does that sound to us? What does it mean? Is it possible that God just wants to love us? You'll note that God says these things to Israel after they had failed him yet again and he says this to Jesus BEFORE he begins his ministry, before he's preached, or healed, before he's done anything. So, unlike pretty much all the love we human beings know, THIS love, the love from God, comes as pure grace, as pure gift – freely given, we don't have to DO anything to earn it, we don't deserve it, all we have to do is reach out our hands and accept it. That sounds easy enough, but I think it's more challenging than we know. I know I've told you the story of meeting with a spiritual director a long time ago, when I was trying to figure out what God was calling me to do. At one point she said to me, "Have you thought that perhaps God is calling you to just sit there and let Him love you?" An interesting suggestion and what still strikes me powerfully about this story is my reaction – which

was total disbelief – ME? God would just like to love ME? Surely there are lots of people much more worthy of that than me! People more talented, more generous, more holy, more WHATEVER! I don't think that my response is that unusual, actually, because I don't think that very many of us have experienced unconditional love. Even though we've all been fortunate enough to have people love us - parents, siblings, friends, marriage partners – I wonder if it's not safe to say that most of us have never experienced the kind of unconditional love God offers us. And that's quite simply because we humans are limited and we love and are loved as people who have our own needs and desires and insecurities and hurts and fears. We're imperfect and, therefore, the love we offer is also imperfect, always, on some level, conditional. We get subtle messages: I'll love you if you love me back; I'll love you as long as you're still beautiful or handsome; I'll love you as long as you make me feel good; I'll love you as long as you do things that make me proud of you, as long as you're a good student, or athlete, or whatever it may be. And those are the messages of those close to us. The world has an even more

demanding set of messages about whether we're worthy: we have to be powerful, rich, popular, productive, movers and shakers – the list goes on and you can construct it as well as I can.

All of this leads to a deep insecurity. We long to know that we are loved, that we matter, that we will be seen and heard and listened to and counted, that someone cares what happens to us, and wills us only the best, that someone will stand by us no matter what happens. So, when we hear those words of God in Isaiah, that offer of unconditional love, we are tempted to think that we're not worthy. And, of course, the absolute truth of it all is that we AREN'T worthy, but that doesn't matter. God knows us, inside and out – sees the desires of our hearts as the opening collect always says – and loves us anyway. Even though we are people who need mercy, God delights in us. Amazing, isn't it?

And it's in this love that God has for us that we find out who we are. Fred Craddock, a famous preacher, somewhere told the story of a man who shared his story with him. Seems he was born out of wedlock and in the rural southern community in

which he lived, both he and his mother were ostracized. He said that in his early teens, he began attending a little church, but he always left before the service was over because he was afraid someone would ask him what a boy like him was doing there. One day, before he could escape, he felt a hand on his shoulder; it was the minister. He looked at me closely, he said, like he was trying to figure out who my father was. Finally, he said, “Well, boy, you are a child of...” and then he paused and when he spoke again, he said, “Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance.” And then he said, “Now go and claim your inheritance.” He said it was a life-changing moment for him. “In fact, he said, that was the beginning of my life.”

As Christians, Baptism is the beginning of our life in Christ. It doesn't mean that we always “get it,” or that we always live out of it. Rather, it's the beginning of a process of, as Paul says, growing into the stature of Christ. There's a story told about a family riding home from church after the service in which the 4-yr. old had been baptized. Suddenly he burst into tears. When his parents asked him what in the world was wrong, he sniffled and said that the

minister who baptized him said he would be brought up in a Christian home. “But, “he said, “I want to stay with you guys!” At least one message there is that all us, including those parents, are on a journey into the fullness of our Baptism and it takes a while.

As we all know, Baptism is the initial sacrament – sacraments being defined as outward signs of inward grace. The church has traditionally said there are seven of these sacraments. But I remember a story about a Native American talking to a missionary about this, and asking about the number of sacraments – those thin places and times when we catch a glimpse of God’s reality and action in the world. When he was told there were seven, he was appalled. “Surely, “he said, “there are many, many more than that. I would have thought you’d say seventy times seven.” And he’s right, I think. We’re recipients of sacraments constantly because we live, as someone once said, in a God-soaked world. All we have to do is school ourselves to SEE God’s action and God’s love in our lives.

I know a number of people who are writing their memoirs - remembering all those times and things

that made them who they are. And, on a number of occasions, especially in the ordination process, I've been asked to write a spiritual autobiography, a spiritual memoir. And sometimes we can best see God's love and action in our lives best when we look backwards. Remember when Moses asked to see God's face and God placed him a crevice and covered him with his hand, allowing him to see only God's back? It's kind of like that, I think, we see God in our lives when we look backwards. I think it's a good idea for each of us to do this once in a while. To sit down and think about our journeys – whether we call them journeys into the stature of Christ, or journeys into the deeper heart of God, or coming to wisdom – whatever. Looking back, we can see those epiphanies that we all have. Those moments when something happened – someone said something that produced an insight, or we had moments of awe, or moments of challenge, or were the recipients of the grace of forgiveness, or maybe we finally came to forgive someone ourselves; times when we were loved; times when we loved. When we do this, when we trace God's action in our lives, we can not only be grateful for what's gone before,



but we can be more open to all those graced moments that we constantly receive. And then, like Jesus, who heard those words of love and affirmation, we can ourselves go about our vocations of manifesting God in our world today – wherever we are, whatever we're doing – living as beloved sons and daughters of God and showing God's face and God's love to the world that desperately needs it. Amen.