

Sermon for Sunday, January 10, 2021 - "The Way of Love"

Baptism of Our Lord - First Sunday after Epiphany
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

I give thanks that this week, after all the turmoil in our nation's capital, we have the chance to reflect upon the power of baptism.

At first glance, baptism may seem removed from the issues of the day. Yet, the gifts God gives us in baptism are the very gifts we need for the facing of this hour. In baptism God declares our true identity - beloved child of God. This happened in Jesus' baptism. It happens when we are first baptized and when we remember our baptisms. God speaks through scripture, through pastors called to proclaim on God's behalf, and through the community. God speaks and acts in a concrete way to declare to you, "You are my beloved child."

Baptism is not what first makes us God's child. Every single person on earth is God's beloved child. We are all created in love, made in God's image. God looks upon each of us and declares us good. God commits to loving each one of us. Yet God knows we struggle to believe that we are loved by God. So God gives us the gift of baptism. God works in a way that we can feel and hear, through water and word, to proclaim over and over: You are my beloved child.

This identity is a gift. It is also a calling - a calling to be defined first and foremost by God rather than anything else. We are called to let our identity as God's beloveds define the way we live and the way we relate to others. It's not easy to fully live out this identity that God has given us. There are so many other ways that the world defines us, that we define ourselves. We're labeled by where we live - urban or rural, red state or blue. We're identified by what we read, how we get our news, where we shop and how we eat. We're defined by our jobs, genders, races, sexual orientations and politics.

Certainly all of those things are important, yet none of them encompass the fullness of who we are: You are more than a vegan, he is not only a Republican. Your boss is not just a gay person. Your neighbor is more than a police officer. We are all so much more than all these labels; they do not ultimately define us. We are mysteries beyond comprehension. We are wondrously and fearfully made.

These identities cannot provide us with ultimate meaning. They can become false gods promising security, purpose and hope, yet leaving us empty. They can divide us. They can lead to hatred and even violence as displayed this week at the Capitol. We saw the evil that happens when tribal, political, religious and national identities become idols and weapons. This week was extreme, but the seeds of this violence lie within each of us. We so often claim privileged status for ourselves and diminish the humanity of those who differ from us.

The voice of God cuts through all of this. In the face of all that seeks to define and claim, drive and divide us, the voice of God rings out to say, "You are my beloved." AND, "They, too, are my beloved." Every single person, every person who stormed the Capitol this week, is a beloved child of God. Every single person, every politician who disgusts you, is a beloved child of God. God loves them. God loves each of us, not be-

cause of what we do or how we vote or how we worship, but because of who God is and what God does. God has committed to love.

Love is not a warm fuzzy emotion that arises because someone is worthy. It is an action, a commitment, a choice. God has chosen the way of love. And God calls us to live as beloved children of God by living in the way of love. Love does not mean having warm feelings for someone or being nice. Love does not turn a blind eye to injustice in order to avoid conflict.

Love seeks wellbeing for all people by working to disrupt everything that divides and diminishes us. Love challenges all the white supremacy in our nation because it harms God's people - people of color and white people. Love renounces the sin and evil that makes us doubt that we are God's beloved, the sin and evil that leads us to treat others as anything less than God's beloved.

Love is both humble and bold. It kneels before others who are loved by God yet stands with integrity and conviction.¹ We are created by Love, claimed by Love, called by Love. We are called to let Love define our identity and our actions.

The world will call you many things. The world will try to rename you. Today we echo the voice of the Triune God. Today we call you beloved of God. When we see you begin to wonder if this name is really yours, we promise to remind you: You are indeed God's beloved child.

May our lives proclaim the truth that all people are God's beloved children.

¹Bishop Michael Curry used this image in a conversation with Krista Tipped and Dr. Russell Moore hosted by the On Being Project. <https://onbeing.org/programs/bishop-michael-curry-dr-russell-moore-spiritual-bridge-people/#transcript>

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