

# **Sermon for Sunday, November 19, 2023**

**Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost**

**BAPTISMAL PROMISES DAY**

**“The Way of Love”**

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**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Decorah, Iowa**

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

I've been thinking about this Sunday as a big baptism bash - a celebration of how this congregation lives in the gift of baptism. Parents are supported in keeping their baptismal promises to their children. New members are welcomed to live out their baptisms in community. Youth affirm their baptisms through the process of Confirmation. The baptism bash today gives us all the chance to reflect on our true identity, something that's important anytime and especially during a time of transition for Good Shepherd, my family, and me.

In baptism God declares our true identity - beloved child of God. This happens for Jesus in his baptism. It happens as we are first baptized and as God draws us back to the waters and promises of baptism time and again. God speaks through scripture, through water and the word, through pastors called to proclaim on God's behalf, and through the community. God speaks and acts in concrete ways to declare to you, "You are my beloved child."

Baptism is not what first makes us God's child. Every person on earth is God's beloved child. We are all created in love, made in God's image. God looks upon the whole human family 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, to know that we are accompanied, held, cherished. 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's also a calling - a calling to be defined first and foremost by God rather than anything else. We're called to let our identity as God's beloveds define the way we live, the way we relate to others. It's not easy to fully live out the identity 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; by what we read; how we get our news; where we shop; how we eat. We're defined by our jobs, genders, races, sexual orientations, and politics.

Certainly, all of these 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 any of these labels; they do not ultimately define us. We are mysteries beyond comprehension. We are wondrously and fearfully made.

Those other identities can't provide us with ultimate meaning. They can become idols, false gods promising security, purpose and hope, yet leaving us empty. Find your people, find your tribe, we're told, and you won't be lonely. Discover your vocation and you'll feel happy and purposeful. Maybe? Sometimes? These identities can also become weapons used against others, they can divide us, contributing to hatred and violence. It's easy to say, *other people do that, other people*

*are so wrong, so evil.* Yet the seeds of this violence lie within each of us. We so often claim privileged status for our own identities 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, even one who makes you so angry, is a beloved child of God. Every person, every politician who disgusts you is a beloved child of God. God loves them, God loves each of us, not because of what we do, how we vote, 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. Love is an action, a commitment, a choice. God has chosen the way of love. God calls 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. As Bishop Michael Curry says, “It kneels before others who are loved by God yet stands with integrity and conviction.”<sup>1</sup>

We are created by Love, claimed by Love, called by Love.

We are called to let Love define our identity and our actions.

When we are unable to love, God draws us back to the waters and promises of baptism for confession, forgiveness, renewal.

People of God, in this time of transition, you have all that you need. Your identity as a congregation, your life together as God’s people, is grounded in the love of God.

You are God’s beloved people, God’s beloved children.

Let’s join in silent prayer and reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop 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>