

*Beloved – Matthew 3:13-17*

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Matthew's telling of Jesus' baptism is often seen as an announcement to everyone about who Jesus is: "This is my son, the Beloved," God says, "with whom I am well-pleased."

But it's more than a public address. Jesus' baptism is also his own calling to remember who he is.

I don't know about you, but it was implied if not directly communicated during my youth when I was out and about town that I should remember who I was.

My last name in the small town I grew up in had significance. Both my parents were well-known there and had prominent positions in the community. So, when I was out and about, it was imperative that I remember who I belonged to—in front of friends, strangers, anybody who would see me.

Evidently, then, my identity came with a requirement—to act in a way and treat others in a way that would be reflective of my last name.

Jesus' baptism signified that he belonged to God. He was God's son, God's beloved.

If we use that term, "beloved," it reflects the deepest connection we can have with another. God used this descriptor in labeling his own son—beloved. And no matter what Jesus did, he would always be beloved.

Yet, what Jesus knew was this: While it was crucial that his identity be announced publicly if he was to begin his

work, it was also essential that Jesus himself lay claim to his identity—that he take up his calling to restore the world.

He is the one who would fulfill God's promise in Isaiah 42: God's "chosen one" on whom God's Spirit would rest...the one who "will bring justice to the nations"...the one who will "open the eyes that are blind" and free "prisoners from the dungeon."

In short, he would be obedient to the One placing this call on his life.

When we are the "beloved" of another, we are bereft of anything we could do to earn such a title. It just happens; it just is.

Yet, there should be a sense of obedience we have toward the giver of such love.

In the society we live in, we embrace our ability to do whatever the heck we want to do with our lives. We have the freedom to make decisions for ourselves. Granted, those decisions come with consequences that are ours alone to face. But, we have the freedom to not be obedient to anyone but ourselves.

As Milton Friedman taught, a society such as ours here in America makes freedom "our ultimate goal in judging social arrangements." While Friedman believes that ours is still the best of all possible social arrangements, he admits that people in societies like ours have difficulty holding themselves together, working on problems and giving citizens a sense of direction when they're used to doing as they darn-well please.

Despite that freedom we love and treasure here, there is a place for obedience in our lives. Obedience seems to be an

entity that doesn't get quite as much play as it used to. Telling somebody to obey another seems to be too personal, too edgy, too filled with negative connotations.

Without a doubt, a certain amount of abuse and oppression have been rendered in too many relationships in the name of obedience. And distinctions clearly must be made between healthy obedience and behavior that only fosters one's control and domination and injustice over another.

Healthy obedience is what moves the world along. It's what allows for problems to be solved, relationships to be nurtured, and the good of all to be realized.

Among the many meanings of baptism, including embracing the moniker of "beloved" that was given to Jesus, obedience should not be discounted. Baptism is a welcoming into the body of Christ—for young and old alike. It signifies a promise made to us by Christ himself that our sins will be forgiven and that through his sacrifice we are raised to new life. As we come up out of the water of baptism, we are reminded that the old life has ended and a new life has begun.

The story of Jesus' baptism, however, signifies the importance of obedience in this sacrament. Jesus himself wished to be baptized. John the Baptist, standing by the Jordan River, baptizing all those who came, objected to Jesus' wish, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Jesus would not be deterred. In words that reflected his complete obedience to his heavenly father, he says to

John, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Jesus obeyed. We wouldn’t think that Jesus needed to be baptized. But Jesus was first and foremost obedient. And that necessitated his baptism.

“How wise of the church, after the sappy sentimentality that inundates Christmas, to turn us toward talk of obedience in Epiphany. Before we meet Jesus the compassionate healer, the wise teacher, the fierce prophet, we meet him as fully obedient to God rather than to the whims of the carping crowd, or even the calls of omnivorous human need.”

To whom are we obedient? Self-made men and women that we like to call ourselves, do we truly submit ourselves to anyone or anything but our own judgment and authority?

When parents bring their children for baptism, they are claiming the infinite grace of God upon their kids’ lives. Their salvation is a gift unable to be earned. It comes solely through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Yet, in their presentation of their children for baptism and in our own baptisms that we will affirm today, we affirm our obedience to an authority higher than ourselves—an authority that we trust knows better than we do what is right for us and for the world.

What does obedience look like for us? In this post-Christian world, can we even identify what obedience to God means?

Maybe obedience is like the life of the young mother of three children, who, once upon a time, testified at her church that her life mainly involved bringing up her and her

husband's children as part of the church by teaching them Bible stories, bringing them to church and helping them learn what it means to be members of the body of Christ. "I know that's not much," she said, "but right now I think that's what God wants from me."

Or maybe obedience is like that of a bureaucrat in a state agency, who told the congregation he's a part of that he comes to church to be reminded that Christians shouldn't lie. "Everyday I'm surrounded with lies, and it's hard to resist becoming part of the system." While truthfulness doesn't contribute to his career advancement, he would rather submit to the demands entailed in being a Christian, "and I can't lie without God making me tell the truth."

Or, obedience might mean simply hanging in there despite the great and sometimes justified temptation to bail out.

Are you all familiar with the name Philip Yancey? He's a well-known evangelical writer who wrote for *Christianity Today* over many years and who wrote many books, including *What's So Amazing About Grace* and *The Jesus I Never Knew*. (Both of them are in our church library.)

I read this week that Mr. Yancey has announced that he will retire from writing and speaking engagements because of a long-term "sinful affair" he had with a married woman over an eight-year period. Yancey himself has been married to his wife for fifty-five years.

"My conduct defied everything I believe about marriage," Mr. Yancey wrote in a statement. "It was also totally inconsistent with my faith and my writings and caused deep pain for her husband and both of our families."

For her part, Yancey's wife, Janet, said in a statement, "I made a sacred and binding marriage vow 55½ years ago, and I will not break that promise. I accept and understand that God through Jesus has paid for and forgiven the sins of the world, including Philip's."

Forgiveness between humans does not come as easily, she suggested: "God grant me the grace to forgive also, despite my unfathomable trauma."

We would understand Mrs. Yancey's desire to bail out of her marriage. To be the victim of infidelity is indeed traumatic and unfathomable. Yet, evidently, she desires to remain in that marriage. Maybe she sees the keeping of her promise as an act of obedience—not to her cheating husband at this point, but to the God who calls her "beloved" and who she still wishes to honor.

We obey God not because we see obedience as an inheritance tax that God levies on the free gift of salvation. We obey as our expression of love to the God who made us.

We are beloved. And we must remember this. And in doing so, we should have a greater shot at being obedient—in doing what Jesus would want.