

Born this way!

Isaiah 43: 1-7 I have called you by name, you are mine

Acts 8: 14-17 Peter and John baptized the converts in Samaria.

In the most recent United Church creedal statement called the Song of Faith it says the following:

We are called together by Christ as a community of broken, but hopeful believers, loving what he loved, living what he taught; striving to be faithful servants of God in our time and place...

In grateful response to God's abundant love we bear in mind our integral to the earth and to one another;

Carrying a vision of Creation healed and restored, we welcome all in the name of Christ.

These are just a few excerpts from a beautifully poetic creedal statement. Today is the day we celebrate Jesus' baptism, when he was baptized by John the Baptist in the river after which the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove. Now in the Reform tradition of the church we do not separate baptism into baptism by water and baptism by the spirit. We baptize people through water and the spirit. The Holy Spirit is essential to what we believe. The Holy Spirit is a blessing that is given to the whole church. As Lee Barrett says, "without the enlivening power of the Spirit there can be no church...A primary characteristic of the Holy Spirit is its power to form unity amid cultural, ethnic, and ideological differences and tensions. The Holy Spirit is an inclusive spirit that fosters fellowship and communication across human boundaries."¹

Our theme for January is **Acceptance**. On the front of our bulletin is our Statement of Welcome and Inclusion. It talks about what we strive to be as a congregation. How we strive to live out our faith where all are welcomed and included and accepted for who they are, as they are in all our diversity. With acceptance we need to not only learn to accept ourselves as we are, to accept others as they are, we need to learn how to accept the promise and love that God has given us. When we feel accepted, we feel we belong. Baptism is the right and ritual that states that we do belong to God; we are a part of something that is greater than ourselves.

¹ Lee Barrett, *Feasting on the Word* Year C, Volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 234.

When thinking about this theme a song by Lady Gaga popped up into my head and I can't get rid of it and it is called 'Born This Way'. Now this song has inspired many and encouraged many people in the world to come to a place of acceptance for themselves. In her song Born This Way she writes,

*I'm beautiful in my way, 'cause God makes no mistakes
I'm on the right track, baby I was born this way
Don't be a drag, just be a queen...*

*Whether you're broke or evergreen
You're black, white, beige, chola descent,
You're Lebanese, you're Orient
Whether life's disabilities left you outcast, bullied or teased.
Rejoice and love yourself today
Cause baby, you were born this way
No matter gay, straight or bi
Lesbian, transgendered life
I'm on the right track, baby I was born to survive....*

*I'm beautiful in my way, 'cause God makes no mistakes
I'm on the right track, baby I was born this way
Don't hide yourself in regret,
Just love yourself and you're set
I'm on the right track, baby
I was born this way*

Being born this way, the act of baptism is rebirth; it's a fresh start, a new beginning. Being baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus is the seal of love and belonging in God's realm and in God's realm we all have a place. We are all loved as we are; we belong.

The passage from Isaiah is entitled *Restoration and Protection Promised*. This passage is one of my favorites and my go-to passage when I am feeling down because it is full of comfort and assurance and it is always associated with baptism, being called and the promise that God created us and therefore we belong to God. We are loved by God and we are redeemed by God. Even when we don't think we are loved God claims us. It says in the scripture; God says "I will gather all my children from east and west, from north and south." Friends God is gathering us all together. God goes on to say that, "I command whatever holds you back to let go and to give my people back to me." So even when it feels like you are drowning in the river of life God is there holding you up. Even when you feel like you are in the line of fire, God will ensure that you do not get burned for God provides us with love and protection. It's a beautiful passage and it makes us feel good, but there is also a challenge in this. The challenge today is to see ourselves as God sees us; precious, honoured and loved for who we are. Or, in the words of Lady Gaga; 'I am beautiful in my own way, because baby I was born this way.' God's creation is always good.

Now hearing these words is often easier than believing them. I have this friend who says, ‘I comprehend what you are saying, I just don’t believe it yet.’

The prophet Isaiah was writing to people in exile. People who were bruised, beleaguered, who had sin or in the words of Claus Westermann: “If the exiles were to take an honest look at themselves, they would see a tiny, miserable, insignificant band of uprooted men and women. People standing on the margins of a hostile empire, but the prophet declares that these people have a new and different identity: they are people valued and honoured by God.”² This passage and the passage from Acts asks us three questions today: Who am I? Where do I belong? and What makes me worthy? “The prophet reminds us that our core identity does not lie in our role as individuals or in our relative size or wealth as a congregation, but our core identity lies in God’s identification of us as precious in my sight and honoured. Our failures do not prompt God to quit us.”³ God does not quit loving us, no matter how insignificant we feel we are, no matter how bad we think we are. Isaiah says that God has redeemed us. Redeemed is defined as to be free from captivity; to repair, restore, to reform. So, how will our faith free us from captivity? What will our faith and our love of God restore?

To accept the words that we are precious, loved and worthy means that we are free from negative self-talk. To believe the words that we are valued and loved for who we are means that we break free from cultural definitions of what success, normal and whatever those arbitrary categories are. As Jessica shared with us last Sunday, human is human. As the children identified today what makes us the same is that we are all human. We all long to be loved and to belong. God gives us identity and value and challenges us to offer that and share that good news with all other people; without judgment. Robertson-Wesley is affirming, not because we are not judgmental, we are affirming because of what we believe, and we need to keep working towards living this out in a way that does not harm or exclude others. So, what happens when we make mistakes and we hurt someone? What happens when we call someone by the wrong name or the wrong pronoun? What happens when we make assumptions about someone else that are false?

There’s a great word called CLAIM. Which I learned about in a workshop on Gender 101. Here are the actions you can do when we hurt or make mistakes. C.L.A.I.M. stands for C – centre yourself, L – listen, A – acknowledge and apologize, I - inquire and M – move forward. As Christians we need to CLAIM our mistakes to apologize when we hurt others and to move forward through reconciliation and forgiveness which is what we, as Christians, are called to do. And we do this, not in fear, because we know that God is with us and the Holy Spirit can move people and things in ways that we would never expect; to places of healing.

Last Sunday I wanted to share a story, but it just didn’t feel right, so today I will share it. In one of my first congregations, I chose for whatever reason, to take on a very powerful lady in the

² Claus Westermann, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 220.

³ _____, p. 222.

congregation who had decided that the organist had to wear a choir gown because that's what we always do, and I took this opportunity to say, 'well you know, I don't think Jesus would care. I mean Jesus wore sandals while he was working so what does it matter what we wear?' This lady came from a place where you grew up wearing a dress, a hat and gloves to church and that was what you do, and this is what she was teaching her grand-children who were living with her. Needless to say, we had this confrontation, she didn't like what I had to say, and she stormed out. And I thought, uh-oh, now I am in trouble, what am I ever going to do. I was there for 16 years. It was probably about year 5 when her grand-children were suddenly in my youth group and I was caring for them. And again, I made another fatal error at 33 and got my nose pierced, to which many parents said, 'Why would you do that? What are you teaching our children?' And I said, 'Well it's something that I wanted to do, and it is part of who I am now. It's just what it is, and it took you six months to notice so it really can't be that bad.' To which again I got that nod, that look of disappointment. What's amazing to me though is that in the end, they, the grand-parents, the lady who was so upset with me, asked me to not only make sure I married her grand-children, but I baptized her great-grand-children. And to this day we have a new mutual respect and a better understanding of how we are not called to judge one another, but to accept one another and who we are and who everyone else is for who they are and to love the gifts that each of us share. So, as you go from this place go in the assurance that you are loved, precious and valued and that you belong here no matter what you do. For baby you were born this way and God says it was good. Thanks be to God.