



Sunday January 10, 2021
Mark 1:4-11 (First Sunday after the Epiphany)

Pastor Tony Acompanado

Affirmation

I'd like to begin our time together this morning with a question: *How often do you think about your baptism?* (Now don't worry, I'm not judging here, I'm just asking the question for some self-reflection). Perhaps, it was your parents, grandparents, or someone else who reminded you of its importance by celebrating the anniversary of your baptism each year – so baptism has always been important to you. Or maybe you learned to appreciate it later in life like during confirmation or even later as an adult. Or maybe your appreciation of baptism comes in knowing its theological significance but, truth be told, you just don't think about it all that often.

Take a moment and think about how often you actually think about your baptism and about the significance it might hold for your daily life. Because if we're being completely honest, then I'm guessing it's not all that much. Perhaps for *some of you* it is quite meaningful, but in general most people I know don't think about their baptism too often.

I'm asking you to think about all this, because today, this first Sunday after Epiphany, is the day when we remember Jesus' baptism. And as we dive deeper into today's gospel text from Mark, we're given an opportunity to think more deeply and claim more fully, the promises God made to us at our *own* baptism. More importantly, I'm asking you to think about all this because I believe there's perhaps no more important event in our lives than our baptism.

One of the things I'm struck by in today's culture is the widespread focus on *affirmation*. Facebook gives us the chance to "like" movies or books or posts – and to have things we share "liked" by our "friends" in return. Twitter, and Instagram invite us to collect an unlimited number of "followers," or "friends," – many of whom we may never have even met. Sports programs routinely reward kids with participation medals for just showing up. Ads are increasingly personalized, targeting our particular tastes and creating the false impression that *we are the most important customer in the world*. A false fantasy that goes on and on across so many aspects of our lives.

And one of the reasons I think social media is so powerful is because it creatively offers *affirmation* in ample doses. Deep down, of course, we know that this kind of affirmation doesn't mean all that much – or at least shouldn't. Many of the people we encounter across the internet don't really *know* us and we don't *know* them either – so how can their "likes" create any enduring sense of value or worth? And yet, it's so hard not to wonder what was wrong with the picture we posted that only 20 people liked it when someone else's received 200 likes.

So, while this affirmation may be somewhat superficial, it's at least better than nothing, right? We crave that recognition and interaction because at heart we're inherently *social* people. Almost every fiber of our being reflects God's observation in the book of Genesis that it's not good for us to be alone – and so the relentless and universal affirmation that social media offers, creates the perception that we're *connected* to so many others and surrounded by a community of like-minded and like-able people that *value* us.

But is it a perception or is it merely an illusion? Sherry Turkle – an MIT professor, internet scholar, and author of the book *Alone Together*, discovered that people today report feeling simultaneously *more connected and lonelier* than ever before. So why is that? Because while we may crave *affirmation*, what we really need is *acceptance*.

But I want to be clear, acceptance, isn't the same as "fitting in." In fact, it's the exact opposite. Fitting in is all about changing yourself in order to be found acceptable to those around you, while acceptance is simply being recognized and valued as you are. I think most of us would agree that feeling accepted is important and maybe even necessary in order to lead a healthy and productive life.

Which is where baptism comes in. I'd like you to notice two things in Mark's treatment of the story of Jesus' baptism. First, notice God's words to Jesus. They're personal, emotional, and powerful. "*You* are my beloved son. With *you* I am well pleased." Wrapped in these words of acceptance are the blessings of identity, worth, and unwavering honor. Second, notice that these words come just before Jesus' temptation and the start of his ministry. This event – Jesus' baptism – isn't incidental to Mark's story about Jesus – it's foundational.

Again, and again as Jesus casts out unclean spirits, heals the sick, feeds the hungry, and welcomes the outcast, he will only do to others what has already been done to him – telling them both in what he says and what he does that they, too, are beloved children of God with whom God is well pleased. And the darkest moment of the story when Jesus feels absolutely abandoned is followed immediately by the story of resurrection, where the messenger testifies that God has kept God's baptismal promise and continues to accept and honor Jesus as God's own beloved Son.

So, in the very same way, when we are at *our* lowest moments, we might remember that the God who raised Jesus from the dead is the same one who promised in baptism to never abandon us and to love and accept us always as his beloved children – even and especially when we have a hard time loving and accepting ourselves.

This is why I think baptism is so incredibly important, because it offers us the acceptance, not merely affirmation, of the Creator of the Universe and in doing so empowering us to accept others in the same way. Baptism reminds us that wherever we may go and whatever we may do or have done to us – God continues to love us, accept us, and hold onto us.

The "like" culture of Facebook and other social media may offer us a false sense of conditional affirmation, but God's baptismal promises of acceptance are unconditional. So, in these days when we are constantly being sold cheap affirmation as a substitute for genuine acceptance, and in a world where a variety of social, cultural, and commercial forces attempt to lay claim to our sense of identity – may we remain grounded in our *baptismal identity* as children of God and may we follow Jesus in doing for others what has already been done for us.

Dear friends, let us commemorate this day not just as the day we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, but also as the day we rediscover *our own baptism and blessing*. And as you receive the invitation to hear, see, and *feel* the promise and blessing of baptism once again may you be reminded that in baptism God has promised to love you forever. In baptism God has promised that God will never let you go. You are a beloved child of God and with you God is well pleased. So, hear again the promise of baptism that you have been "sealed by the Holy Spirit and + marked with the cross of Christ forever." Thanks be to God. Amen.