

***“Kind, Smart & Important”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**Baptism of the Lord**  
**January 13, 2019**

**First Scripture Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7**

<sup>1</sup>But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. <sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. <sup>3</sup>For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. <sup>4</sup>Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. <sup>5</sup>Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; <sup>6</sup>I will say to the north, “Give them up,” and to the south, “Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— <sup>7</sup>everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

**Second Scripture Reading: Luke 3:15-16, 21-22**

<sup>15</sup>As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup>John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire...

<sup>21</sup>Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup>and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”



**Sermon: *“Kind, Smart, and Important”***

The start of a new year is traditionally seen as a good time to start over; to commit to changes that will make our lives better. We call these commitments resolutions. We resolve to quit smoking, to start eating right and exercising, to get to work on that novel you’ve always been meaning to write. We resolve to improve things we don’t like about ourselves or to do things we’ve always wanted or needed to do. A new year is a chance for a new start. It’s a chance to do better than we did last year.

Resolutions can be a good thing. Turning the page on a calendar gives us a blank slate to fill with new accomplishments and new ways of living. None of us is a finished product. Life is a process and every day we grow and become more of what we were created to be.

There’s a line in one of Reverend Martin Luther King’s speeches where he really encapsulates this process. He was quoting another preacher who he says: “didn't quite have his grammar right but uttered words of great symbolic profundity. ‘Lord, we ain't what we oughta be. We ain't what we want to be. We ain't what we gonna be. But, thank God, we ain't what we was.’”<sup>1</sup>

Change and growth are good. It’s a part of the human experience. And committing ourselves to doing better and to opening-up ourselves to be formed and molded by God - these are good things.

But there is a fine line between a healthy self-awareness of our own growing edges and a damaging self-critical attitude that sees our own flaws as bigger than they are. The insidious side to making New Year's resolutions is that sometimes those resolutions reflect an unhealthy view of ourselves. We want to lose weight because "being overweight isn't normal." We want to experience something new because our lives aren't as interesting as other people's lives. We want to be more successful because we feel like we are failing. Sometimes our resolutions reflect the ways we see ourselves as inadequate.

Which is understandable. We live in an age of the internet, and Facebook, and 24-hour cable news. We see more and hear more than at any other time in human history. Which means we see more advertising and more images of supposedly beautiful and perfect people, who reportedly do great things and who have what are widely considered to be wonderful lives.

There was a commercial on TV the other day for some product, I still couldn't tell you what it was, though I'm sure someone younger and hipper than me would probably know. It showed two twenty-something "beautiful" people in bathing suits, writhing around on some beautiful tropical beach with waves crashing around them. At the end of the commercial there was only the name of the product. They didn't show the product or tell what it does. But that commercial wasn't about selling a product. It was about selling an image that was associated with a product.

Which is what a lot of advertising does. And those images are powerful in that they help form our ideas of what is considered beautiful. Most of us don't match that particular size 0, six-pack abs, unblemished complexion that we see on TV. And so, the lesson we learn is that we are less-than, not good enough, not beautiful because we don't look like "that."

There seems to be a whole market system developed around the notion that you and I are not good enough and that buying the right products will fix us. The right toothpaste or shampoo can make you more attractive; the right diet or gym membership can make you healthier; the right college or investment firm can make you more successful.

We walk through life and see pretty people who look like they've got their lives together and it can be easy to forget that there is more to them than what we see. Social media does a great job of this because it allows people to edit their lives and show the world only the good parts, photographed from the best angles.

And so, we lift-up those images as models of perfection and goals to attain when we know nothing of the struggles and flaws in those people's lives. We hold ourselves to impossible standards. We let ourselves fall into the trap of believing everyone else has it figured out and we are the ones who are damaged.

For example: When I was growing up, I thought in high school you were supposed to date around and have lots of girlfriends. When I didn't have even one girl who was remotely interested in me, I felt like a complete troll. It wasn't until years later that I realized my expectations about dating in high school were largely formed by watching Fonzie on Happy Days.

I loved watching *The Office* when it was on TV and now that Will Grey has discovered it, I watch it with him on Netflix. And as much as I love Jim and Pam's relationship, it does set a pretty high bar for what a marriage is supposed to look like; a bar we don't often meet.

One of my heroes is Atticus Finch from my favorite novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*. He's a single dad who raises two children but never even raises his voice to them. Whenever I yell at one of my boys and lose my cool for the billionth time, I remember Atticus Finch and think, "Man, I'm not a very good parent."

Do you ever have times like that? When you compare yourself to other people and think that you're not very good? That you've failed. That if you could just get it together like *those* people have it together... For many people, our

own worst critics are the ones that face us in the mirror every morning. We don't need someone else to beat us up or bully us; we can do a pretty good job of that all by ourselves.

On that subject, poet and author C. Joybell C. wrote something I think is pretty profound:

“I am my own biggest critic. Before anyone else has criticized me, I have already criticized myself. But for the rest of my life, I am going to be with me and I don't want to spend my life with someone who is always critical. So I am going to stop being my own critic. It's high time that I accept all the great things about me.”<sup>2</sup>

I like that because it acknowledges that we are, at the core of our beings, good people. Our world teaches that we *can* be good if we are successful or beautiful, but in the gospel of Jesus Christ we find a message that runs counter to the one society so often pushes on us and that we so eagerly rush to accept. We are beautiful and amazing creatures, not because of what we have done, but simply because we are made by God, and loved by God.

In our New Testament reading today, Luke tells us the familiar story of Jesus' baptism. In some accounts, Jesus comes to John and John is reluctant saying essentially “shouldn't you be baptizing me?” But here, Luke doesn't really worry about those details. What matters for Luke is the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus “like a dove” and a voice from heaven sounds forth saying “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Now baptism symbolizes many things in our reformed tradition. When we baptize children, we see that as acknowledging God's claim on them as children of God. For adults, we see the water as washing away our sins. For some, baptism represents our descending into the water and then rising with Christ in the resurrection. But however you see it, baptism is about being given new life as children of God.

But if this is all baptism is, then why does Jesus need to be baptized? If he is sinless, then why does he need to have sins washed away? If he is God incarnate and is born as savior of the world, what old life needs to die in order to live a new one?

For Luke, Jesus' baptism is very much about the proclamation at the end of it: “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

In baptism we are marked by God as one of God's own. Baptism signifies God's claim on us; that we belong to God; but not like a favorite object. We belong to God in the same way that your children belong to you. Baptism does not mark us as God's property; baptism marks us as God's beloved.

In our baptisms we are reminded, and it is proclaimed to the world, that we are important; worthy of love and respect, both from other people and from ourselves. How might our lives and our communities be different if we took that truth to heart? How might our interactions and our relationships be changed if we truly saw, not only others, but also ourselves, as children of God, special to God, valued by God, important to God?

Could we dismiss the poor and the needy? Could we turn away the refugee? Could we turn away from those who are in pain, neighbors who have lost loved ones, friends who are struggling? Could we look at ourselves in the mirror and see only what is wrong? Would we be so self-critical? Would we hold onto our mistakes and our failures and beat ourselves up over them?

I saw on Facebook a while back where some anonymous sage had written that “If being hard on yourself worked. It would have worked by now.”<sup>3</sup>

So, we have to remember that the people we are, are people in process. We are children of God, created in God's own image, loved and cherished by God. The hardest thing to do sometimes is to see ourselves as important. But we are. No child of God is unimportant.

Some of you might remember *The Help*. It told the story of African-American women who worked as domestic servants in white households during the civil rights movement of the 1960's. One of the most memorable and enduring scenes is when Abilene Clark, a maid and nanny, holds the child she cares for every day, Mae Mobley and tells her "You is kind. You is smart. You is important."<sup>4</sup> Several times over the course of the film we hear Abilene repeat these words to the child as a form of affirmation and as a reminder that regardless of what anyone might tell her, she is precious.

When her mother doesn't find her beautiful. "You is kind. You is smart. You is important."

When her mother chastises her behavior. "You is kind. You is smart. You is important."

When her mother seems to reject her for simply not being good enough. "You is kind. You is smart. You is important."

It's one of those strange facts of life that we often remember criticism more clearly than we do compliments. We tend to dismiss the kind words we receive as just empty flattery, or as the ramblings of someone who doesn't really know any better. But we take those negative comments seriously. They're just easier to believe.

But when we begin to feel down on ourselves about our mistakes, or our looks, or our ability, or anything else, we need to remember that in our baptisms we are marked as children of God. That means no matter what, that we are loved and appreciated by the one who created us and who knows us more deeply and intimately than even we know ourselves.

So, let's make those resolutions to be healthier and to read more and let's keep working to be better than we were last year. But let us also remember that we are, each of us, children of God. And that makes each of us unique and precious.

You are kind. You are smart. You are important. God made you that way and thank God for that.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

#### End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Balcomb, Theo. "A Promise Unfulfilled: 1962 MLK Speech Recording Is Discovered." *NPR.org*, NPR, 20 Jan. 2014, 2:39 PM ET, [www.npr.org/2014/01/20/264226759/a-promise-unfulfilled-1962-mlk-speech-recording-is-discovered](http://www.npr.org/2014/01/20/264226759/a-promise-unfulfilled-1962-mlk-speech-recording-is-discovered).

<sup>2</sup> Quote by Poet & Author C. Joybell C.

<sup>3</sup> Project Happiness. Photo of Text. *Facebook*, 6 January, 2016, 5:41 PM, <https://www.facebook.com/projecthappiness/photos/a.143702586636/10153159127441637/?type=3&theater> 4 February, 2019

<sup>4</sup> *The Help*. Dir. Tate Taylor. By Tate Taylor and Kathryn Stockett. Perf. Emma Stone, Viola Davis, and Octavia Spencer. Dreamworks/Touchstone Pictures, 2011. Film.