

“What can we do to please God?”

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January 12, 2020

Matthew 3:13-17

I was talking with a friend named Brandon about family pictures recently. He is the youngest son of a large family. His father died, and so he went into the house, announced that he was taking every single picture with him in it. And he has been sharing each photo, thumbing through the yellowed corners, and telling stories about the scenes. We laugh over the little boy, on the green shag carpet, opening Christmas gifts. Or the toddler putting a record on a Fisher Price record player.

It's been a good way for him to sort out his grief, as he tries to understand his relationship with his dad. As the youngest, he didn't have a lot of close interaction with his dad. His father spent most of his time, working to provide for his growing family. And yet, even today, Brandon's entire life is set up in a way to please his father. He talks endlessly about what his father told him. And I feel like I know every piece of wisdom that his dad shared, because the words are always in the forefront of Brandon's mind, and at the tip of his tongue. I hear about showing up on time for the job, and working hard, no matter what the task is in front of you. From managing a corporation to shoveling the walkway, there is no job too menial to give it 110%. If it's worth doing, then it's worth doing well.

I always smile at these echoes of Brandon's father. I mean, I know the other stories too. I know that Brandon's dad was terrible in a lot of ways. But right now, Brandon is picking out the best of his dad, and his hope to connect with his father is palpable. I can sense this longing in his voice, this hope his father died proud of him. Brandon wants to continue living a life that will make his dad pleased.

Brandon's journey over the last year reminds me of this passage. It's Baptism of the Lord Sunday, when we remember how Jesus went out into the wilderness where John the Baptist preached. And John baptized Jesus.

This was an extremely liberating act. As you might remember, John's father, Zechariah was a priest, and so he participated in purification rituals. In order for a woman or a man to convert to Judaism, they had to participate in ritual bathing. It was also required during different times during a person's sexual functioning. They took six stone jars and filled them with 20 to 30 gallons of fresh water. And they bathed in the water.

It was a costly ritual, and so it was out of reach for people who could not afford it. There were also a lot of gender restrictions. So, John the Baptist, in his radical departure from the

Temple, began baptizing people, directly in the fresh water. There were no gender restrictions. There were no class restrictions. There was no cost involved. They were baptized.

I get the sense that John was the wild-haired priest's son, doing his own thing in the Jordan River. Then, when Jesus was baptized, the heavens opened up, and there was a voice saying, "This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." This story became important as Christianity moved from being a Jewish sect to an offshoot religion. And now, Protestants have two sacraments, Baptism and Communion. They are sacraments, because Jesus did them and Jesus told us to do them. This story also gives us a picture of the Trinity, which is pivotal to our theology.

I want to focus on those words that come from the heavens: "This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." This is a very powerful sentence for me, personally. Once, when my father was in the midst of hospice care, a spiritual director instructed me to say these words in the mirror, each time I washed my face, brushed my teeth, or turned on some water.

At first, I protested. I told myself that these were words for Jesus, and the words made Jesus unique and divine. But I knew that was a weak argument, because through the act of baptism, these words extend to us.

So, after I stopped arguing with myself, I looked in the mirror, said the words, and began to cry. I was confused at my grief. I couldn't figure out what the tears were about, until I realized that *I didn't believe the words*. I did not feel beloved, and I certainly could not imagine a God who was pleased with me. I mean, I was a minister, who had a bona fide calling that I was living out, and I could not accept these words. There was something deeply wrong. I mean, how could I stand in front of a congregation and tell them that God loved them, and that God was pleased with them, if I could not accept the words for myself? Then I realized that my image of God was too closely tied to the image of my father, whom I could never please. And somehow, I needed to stop basing God on my earthly father.

And, I have to say, it probably took a full month before I could say them without getting all worked up.

At the core of many of our lives, we have this longing to connect with our parents or guardians. We grow up, needing this love and affection, but our parents are imperfect, they're absent, they may not have been emotionally healthy, and they often could not give us what we needed. They scolded us when we cried, instead of comforting our pains. They based their love on our performance, instead of giving it to us without strings attached. They become separated from us, physically or emotionally. And so, we walk around with this hole.

We try to fill that chasm things—things to prove our worth to ourselves or to our neighbors. It might be achievements or awards. It might be marks of status or success. But nothing quite fills it.

I think that's why religion can be so powerful. I think that's one of the many reasons why these stories are such good news. Because one of the most vital metaphors for the spiritual life can be a parental one, and it often includes a sense of estrangement and reunion. Like the story of the prodigal son, when Jesus tells of the father embracing his wayward child. It doesn't matter what the son has done, how long he was gone, partying away his inheritance. It mattered that he returned.

Or when Jesus cries out that he is like a mother hen, who just wants to gather her chicks under her wing. Or when Jesus explains the central metaphor for our relationship with God is the spirit giving birth to us. He declares that we must be born again! And suddenly, we can imagine a Mother God, the Holy Spirit who groans in birthing pains for the creation of our bodies and our lives. A fierce Mother who smells the tops of our head, knowing that there is nothing we could ever do to ever her love us less.

Or, like in this passage, where there is a voice from heaven, calling out, "You are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

The theologian, Paul Tillich says that sin is estrangement, and grace is unity. It's an interesting way to understand our faith. Sin is when we become separated from God, our neighbors, and ourselves. And our spiritual lives can be understood in this context. These stories of fathers embracing their sons, hens gathering their chicks, the Holy Spirit mothering us—they are stories of unity.

God wants to pour out love. God wants to be united with us. God wants us to experience a sort of grace that has nothing to do with how well we perform, how much money we have, or how much we can do good. But God wants you to know that you are enough. You are accepted. There is nothing that you can do that will separate you from the love of God. Nothing.

The key for me was that I was trying to form God into the image of my imperfect parent, instead of understanding that God is the perfect love that parents strive to have. Then I could understand that God is still echoing those words of Jesus to all of us: "You are God's beloved child, in whom God is well pleased."

For Brandon, the experience was a little different. He called me one day. His voice was trembling, and I thought something was terribly wrong, until he told me, "I had this experience. I can't really explain it. Except that I now understand that God is for me. God is on my side. God wants good things for me." And I knew that he had the same experience I did. He had learned to internalize the same thing I did when my father died.

When we ask, "What can we do to please God?" The answer is always "nothing." Because your very being pleases God, and there's nothing you can do to change that. You are God's child and you are beloved.