

“The Power of Affirmation”
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Isaiah 43:1-7
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The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

The first church job I ever had was working with a junior high youth group. This was a group of about 30 seventh and eighth graders, and I had great plans for them. I was going to teach them a lot about the Bible, they'd memorize important verses, we'd talk about Jesus and love and heaven, and changing the world. I'd teach them great theological concepts like the atonement and the Trinity and they would find themselves in high school as young spiritual giants.

Yeah, that didn't work so well...

When he saw that I was struggling, our pastor said to me something that I never forgot. He said that I was going about this all wrong. The kids really weren't interested in being spiritual giants. He said, “These are 13 and 14 year olds. Remember what it was like when *you* were 13? What they really want is to know that you *like* them.” They want to know that I like them. Words of wisdom. And I do remember what it was like when I was 13. A lot of us have repressed those memories. It is not easy to be a young teenager. Where do I fit in? What am I going to be? Does this make me look stupid? My body looks terrible. Everyone is laughing at me. I can't believe my mother makes me hug her in public. My father is a total embarrassment. I have no friends.

It's those kind of thoughts that go through our heads when we are young. I discovered that if church youth group was a place where someone really liked the kids, where no kid came in without being greeted like we were glad she was there, where we were interested in how his week had gone, that church was a safe place to be themselves: *that* made youth group a success. The power of affirmation. To let someone know that they are wanted, loved, and even liked, is a great gift to give. Because we all want that, don't we?

Isn't that what Jesus receives when he comes to the Jordan to be baptized by John? It is interesting that when Luke describes this event, he doesn't really say too much about the actual baptism. In fact he says nothing about it. There is no description of what he does—Jesus went down into the river, went about half-way out so he was waist deep—nothing about what Jesus or John says, nothing like that. Luke just says, when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying. The baptism is important, but also important is what happens afterward—the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove and a voice comes and says, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” Now maybe God said this for the sake of the people around Jesus, so they could know who Jesus was, but I can't help feeling that God said this to Jesus—personally, intimately, lovingly. Jesus was human and all humans need to hear that once in a while, don't we? You are mine, I love you, and I'm really happy you're here.

In his book *Craddock Stories*, celebrated preacher Fred Craddock tells of an evening when he and his wife were eating dinner in a little restaurant in the Smokey Mountains. A strange and elderly man came over to their table and introduced himself. "I am from around these parts," he said. "My mother was not married, and the shame the community directed toward her was also directed toward me. Whenever I went to town with my mother, I could see people staring at us, making guesses about who my daddy was. At school, I ate lunch alone. In my early teens, I began attending a little church but always left before church was over, because I was afraid somebody would ask me what a boy like me was doing in church. One day, before I could escape, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the minister. He looked closely at my face. I knew that he too was trying to guess who my father was. 'Well, boy, you are a child of. . .' and then he paused. When he spoke again he said, 'Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance.' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now, you go on and claim your inheritance.' I left church that day a different person," the now elderly man said. "In fact, that was the beginning of my life."

"What's your name?" Dr. Craddock asked.

He answered, "Ben Hooper. My name is Ben Hooper." Dr. Craddock said he vaguely recalled from when he was a kid, his father talking about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected a fellow who had been born out of wedlock as the governor of their state. His name was Ben Hooper.¹

That's the feeling the people of Israel felt when the prophet Isaiah proclaims to them the words of God, "You are mine . . . you are precious in my sight and honored and I love you." Who doesn't want to hear words like this?

In our church we almost always do Youth Sunday in the middle of May and it's always fun for me to take a Sunday off and sit in the congregation and have the kids lead the whole service, including the music and the sermon. Of course the seniors always do the sermons and they are such a highlight of the service for all of us who are here. Years ago one young woman was quite nervous about doing her "senior sermon," but when she got up here she handled it just fine and gave a terrific sermon. After it was over I gave her a quick hug and told her how proud I was of her. Several years after that her mother told me that her daughter still remembered that day how after giving her sermon she went up to her mother and with tears in her eyes and a great smile on her face she told her mother "Pastor Mark said he was proud of me!" Of course I was thrilled she felt that had meant so much to her, but I immediately wondered how many of our youth have walked out our door and didn't know that I was proud of them. How many of them never heard the words of affirmation that I am glad they are here, that we are glad that they are here? Baptism is an affirmation that we are loved and accepted by God. But it is also a call to us that we are to be loving and affirming to each other. Whenever we baptize someone in this church, water is put on their head and they are baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And then we take a little bit of oil and make the sign of the cross on their forehead and say, "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as

¹ Craddock, Fred. *Craddock Stories*.

Christ's own forever.” Marked as Christ's own. We belong to him. And then we walk out into the congregation and you all stand up and we say, “She has now been received into the holy catholic church through baptism and God has joined her with us in Christ's ministry of love and peace and justice.” Joined her with us. We are in this together.

We've said many times that what we want for this church is that this will always be a place where everyone is welcome and where each person is valued. Each one of us is valued. We can never say that enough to one another. Each one of you is valued. Each one is precious. Each one is loved.

An ancient Christian catechism describes baptism as a "visible sign of invisible grace." By the grace of God, we are surrounded and upheld every day. The great Protestant Martin Luther was plagued at times by a sense of unworthiness and despair. To drive back those demons, he kept an inscription over his desk that read, "Remember, you have been baptized." Often, he would touch his forehead and remind himself, "Martin, you have been baptized.”²

I've heard and read that story several times, but there's something I'd never done until this week. The great Presbyterian pastor Joanna Adams when telling this story suggests that each of us do the same. Touch your forehead. You too are a child of God. You too have been claimed by Christ. The words of the Spirit came to Jesus at his baptism to affirm that he was the Son of God. But they also come to each one of us. The words of Isaiah came to the people of Israel as they were returning home after years of exile, wondering if God had abandoned them. “You are my child, you are precious in my sight. With you I am well pleased.”

² Adams, Joanna. *God Believes in You*. Sermon, January 10, 2010. *Day 1*.

Someone once asked me when my life here is over and I come before my Maker if there is anything I'm going to say to God or if there is anything I would like God to say to me. I have to admit that I don't think at that moment I'll have a whole lot to say, but there may be plenty that God has to say to me and I'm not sure I want to hear all of it. I've always hoped that I would hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant," but I'm not counting on that. What I am counting on is even if I have nothing to say for myself, I won't need to, because Jesus will be there and he will say, "He's one of mine. He's one of mine." I hope we all are.