

# YOU TOO ARE GOD'S BELOVED SON OR DAUGHTER

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**Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

Whenever I am in a pinch, time wise, someone--usually my wife--says, "Why don't you just preach an old sermon?"

The question is well-intentioned and meant to help. But the reason I don't preach old sermons is that it is no fun for me and rarely for the congregation. To draw on our friend, John the Baptist, rehashed sermons may be baptized in *water*, but they are rarely baptized with *fire!*

Most of my sermons come from what is going on in our church, or culture, or with people I know and love, or with me. And a big part of what's going on *with me* right now is grieving the death of my mother. So pardon me for telling yet another story about mom. But I think when you hear it, you'll agree it is spot on the point I want to make today: that you *too* are God's beloved son or daughter.

Growing up, there was a young man in our church youth group I'll call Harry, a pseudonym. Everyone knew Harry was wired a little differently but my sister, Linda, and I loved him dearly. He was one of the funniest, most fun-loving, and fully alive people I have ever known.

Well, recently, Harry emailed me about my mother's death. And in his message, he told me about a fateful and hurtful experience at Ridgecrest, the Baptist conference center in the mountains of North Carolina.

One afternoon, Harry was explaining to a young woman on the trip that he did not love her in the way she loved him. In her hurt and rejection, she announced loudly enough for all to hear, "Well, I don't care because you *walk* like a girl and *talk* like a girl and you must be queer!"

Overhearing this, the church's associate pastor--who even then, I knew was a certifiable jerk--took Harry aside. He announced he was going to teach Harry to "*walk* like a man and *act* like a man." Recalling this painful encounter from decades ago, Harry wrote, "I guess this was his version of 'conversion therapy.' I think in his mind he thought he was helping but it was one of the worst experiences of my life. To say I was embarrassed and humiliated is an understatement. I felt . . . (I had been outed) and that my life at 16th Street (Baptist) was over. I would never be able to face any of you again."

Harry went on to recount the fear and self-loathing he felt that was almost more than he could bear. He tried to hide his pain with his usual self-deprecating humor, and for the most part, it worked. "But your mother," Harry wrote, "could see something was wrong and I will never forget her taking my hand and telling me in that soft loving voice of hers, 'Harry, *son*, I don't know what is wrong but the Lord loves you for who you are. He created you and I love you.'"

In his email, Harry continued, "How profound is that? I'm sure it never entered her mind that I was gay and I'm not sure of her thoughts on the subject, but in spite of any of that she loved me and she loved me for who I was."

Well, Harry went on to experience a lot more pain and rejection for being who he was. Eventually, he was rejected by his parents, his church, and many of his friends. He

contemplated suicide on several occasions. But “every time I felt as if I could not go on,” Harry wrote, “I held on to your mother’s comforting words. I stopped church for several years because I felt I would never be accepted. The Holy Spirit continued to work in my life and I knew I had to find my way home to a church where I would be accepted. I did find that church--All Saints Episcopal in Phoenix--and I am forever grateful for churches that truly follow the teachings of Christ and open their doors to all people.

Thank God Knollwood is one of those!

Harry is now--as I knew him then--a vibrant, committed Christian. And I am deeply grateful that my mother’s blessing at a crucial time helped save his life. Concluding, Harry wrote, “I know this is a difficult time for all of you, but please know there was a young man in Greensboro, North Carolina who is a very happy adult today because your mother showed him unconditional love when he needed it the most.”

This week, as I pondered today’s text from Isaiah, I kept thinking about Harry; and how the prophet’s words of blessing were meant just for him. “But now, thus says the Lord who *created* you, O Jacob, who *formed* you, O Israel: do not fear, for I have *redeemed* you; I have *called you by name*, you are *mine*” (Isaiah 43:2).

Granted these precious words--*created, formed, redeemed, called*--were first addressed to Israel. But through faith in Jesus Christ, I proclaim they are also meant for Harry, as they are also meant for you. “Harry, Bob, Nancy, Sue, you are *precious* in my sight, and *honored*, and *I love you*” (Isaiah 43:4). “*Do not fear, for I am with you* (v. 5) . . . You who I *created* for my glory and *called by your name*” (v. 7).

As my mother said to Harry, “The Lord loves you for who you are. He created you and I love you.”

Or as God said to Jesus at his baptism, “You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased.” And that was *before* Jesus did anything in his ministry, before he did anything to earn such love; such love, God’s love, was and is a sheer gift.

And as Jesus says to each of you in the power of the Holy Spirit, the One who takes Jesus’ words from way back then and makes them his words to you now: “You *too* are God’s beloved son or daughter.”

To be sure, God’s blessing of Jesus is different in some ways from God’s blessing of us. Jesus was the Son of God in a way we are not, a point Luke makes emphatically in the story of the virgin birth. Jesus is the utter and complete union of the holy and the human in one remarkable life. He came from God in his birth and on the far side of his death and resurrection, he returned to God, becoming forever after the human face of the eternal. As the New Testament says it, “For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, the fully human one, Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5).

But the whole point of Jesus’ good news is to extend God’s blessing of Jesus at the Jordan to all God’s lost and bewildered children who have forgotten who they are. For in one way or another, at one time or another, most of us feel like damaged goods.

Maybe we fail to live up to someone’s storied expectations of us, or our own expectations of ourselves. Maybe a divorce, or job loss, or health challenge blind sides our safe, comfortable life and leaves us wondering what we did to deserve *this*. Or maybe that surly demon of depression, we can never quite shake, keeps telling us we don’t matter, we don’t count, and we are a pitiful failure.

So Jesus wades into the water of the Jordan, not because *he* needs to be there, but because *we* need him to be there: so the sinless Son of God can become one with sometimes broken and bewildered people like me, and maybe like you. And help us discover and trust

again the fearless love of God. How was it John the Baptist said it? "I baptize with water only. But the one who is to come will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire!"

I still remember inviting Jesus into my heart as a little boy of 9. The next morning, I woke up with a new fullness in my chest. Now maybe that was just my body generating a sensation to confirm what I believed--that Jesus now lived in me--but that sense of presence has never left.

At times, the fullness expands and contracts, like the lungs breathing in and breathing out. The Holy Spirit is the divine breath, after all. Perhaps that's the reason that in Hebrew, the primary word for God, *Yahweh*, sounds like "breath."

I just know that when I took Jesus at his word, joined him in the waters of baptism, and did my best to follow him, the confidence grew that God is with me in a vital, personal, deeply-caring way. As Paul sings in Galatians 4, "And because you are (God's) children, God has sent the spirit of the Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

So this morning, when you come to take communion, I'm going to ask you to do something daring. When you share the bread with one another, please use the blessing, "The love of God for you."

But when you share the juice, I'm asking that you use the blessing, "You *too* are God's beloved son" or "You *too* are God's beloved daughter." Because God's blessing of Jesus in the Jordan is also God's blessing of Harry and God's blessing of you.

Years ago when I was pastor of another church, it was my custom--as it is here--to offer a blessing during communion. Back then, I served the deacons and the deacons served the congregation. So as I served each deacon, I leaned over and whispered in their ear, "The Lord loves you and so do I."

A seven-year-old, seated near the front, observed this mysterious ritual for the first time. Awestruck, she leaned over to her father and said, "Daddy, what secret is he telling?"

Well, the secret is this. You too are the beloved son or daughter of God. And if you want to know, trust, and live that blessing; ask Jesus to brand it on your heart.

For that branding of God's fearless, unconditional love on your deepest, hidden self is what it means to be baptized with the Holy Spirit . . . and *fire!*

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*O holy, human Christ, thank you for meeting us where we need you most: in the deep, hidden wounds that sometimes shame and haunt us.*

*And there, at the place of deepest need, brand your love on our hearts. Baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*

*In your name we ask this of our loving heavenly Abba, Amen.*