

Here we are with John the Baptist again. This year we have a remarkable number of Sundays for which he is a central character in the Gospel reading. We have seen him being born and named in the midst of miracles. We have seen him calling people to repentance. We have seen him baptizing some people and chastising others. We have seen him in prison, wondering if Jesus really is the Messiah. Now we see him standing in the Jordan River, reluctantly baptizing his cousin. He is not certain that this is appropriate. "Shouldn't you be baptizing me?" he asks.

John was the first to recognize Jesus as more than a cousin, more than the son of Uncle Joseph and Aunt Mary. John has lived in the wilderness, subsisting on insects and honey and prayer. He is fully aware of his own mortality, his own limitations. He has no illusions of perfection. To quote a lovely translation of the first Beatitude, "he knows his need of God."

John also sees the limitations and shortcomings of the people around him. That is why he is always calling them to repentance. He sees what is wrong in the lives and minds of both the poor and the powerful. So he calls them into the water, to recognize their limitations, their failures, their neediness, so that they can repent, turn their lives around and be as God created them to be. He is a remarkably clear-sighted man.

When he sees Jesus coming down to the river, John sees him clearly as well. He sees someone who does not need to turn around, because he is already facing the right direction, facing straight at God. He sees the One who is exactly what human beings were originally created to be.

So no wonder he is puzzled. "Why would you come to me to be baptized for repentance? You are already where we are trying to be. Shouldn't you baptize me? Help me come closer to God?" "No," Jesus says, "this is how it should be."

Jesus is indeed the 'truly human one', the first human to be wholly what we are all meant to be – and part of being these children of God is submitting ourselves to baptism, acknowledge our limitations and our need of God.

So Jesus and John go down into the water – and when they come back out again there is a remarkable experience. The Gospels differ as to who experienced this vision – just Jesus or others as well. That is not important.

What is important is what is expressed in the experience: the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus, as if a dove of peace came from the sky to alight on him – and a heavenly voice acknowledges Jesus as ‘God’s beloved’.

This aspect of Jesus’ sonship has been widely emphasized in the church in recent years. In the adult forum we recently read Henri Nouwen’s *Life of the Beloved*, just one example of this emphasis. It really is very important to our lives as individuals and as a community, especially on days like today when we are inviting new people into our community through Baptism and Adoption.

In baptism and adoption, in prayer and communion, we are one with Jesus, the beloved of God. It is probably easier for most of us to think of Jesus as beloved of God than it is to think of ourselves this way. But that is precisely what we are called to do – and what we are called to share with others.

This week I was meeting with a parishioner and talking about our understanding of God and what we have to share with other people. She had been chastised for not thinking that everyone who did not think and speak as she did about Christ was automatically doomed to eternal destruction. She was told that without that belief there would be no motivation to evangelism, no reason to share Christ. But, for her, sharing Christ is sharing the love she has experienced, sharing the meaning it has given her life, the strength it has provided. This is Good News, not a threat – the Good News that God loves you, as God loves Jesus and God loves me.

We are the beloved of God. How astonishing and how lovely! No wonder we want to bring other people into this relationship. It is such a gift to realize how we are loved.

In baptism, the priest marks the forehead of the person baptized with the sign of the cross, saying the ancient words, “you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

Forever – that strikes my heart every time.

It reminds me of that favorite prayer from Iona that says, “Though the sun rise cheerless on this isle today I walk in a path of light. I know my greatness. I can’t for a moment fall out of the everlasting arms. I’m in the heart of God and I’m on my way to glory. “

That is what we will assure Estrella of – she cannot for a moment fall out of God’s arms. She is sealed, marked, claimed permanently as a person loved by God. She is in God’s heart – forever.

Each of us who has been baptized has been claimed by God in this way, assured of God's abiding love for us.

That love, that connection is what binds us together as a community. We have experienced that abiding love drawing us into the heart of God and we want to share it. Each time we share communion we are reassured of that love – and we are challenged to share it.

Jesus is the first one to fully live that out, being in the world as a living embodiment of divine love – but not the last. We are invited to embody it ourselves – to see each other person with the loving eyes of God, to build a community founded on unconditional love, to serve everyone we meet lovingly.

So it is not surprising that we are eager to invite new people into our community – to bring them to worship with us, or to serve with us, or to study with us, or to celebrate with us.

In our twice yearly adoptions we are inviting people to claim their place in our community of beloved people, people who know themselves loved by God, such a happy thing.

It will be wonderful to have the whole Vaught family, Kori and Ella Henrie, Pam Miller, Mary Lee Clyburn, and Bill Garrett all claim their places in our community today. And we will include in our prayers the Schmidts and Mary Heilesen and Heather Dixon-Perilloux who all wanted to be adopted but could not be here today. What a joy to be able to share the love that God offers and watch the community grow around us.

When Jesus went down into the water with John, he was not only modeling what we are meant to do – he was also claiming his place with us. He was telling us that we are all in this together – and God is in it with us. In times of rejoicing like today, in times of suffering or fear or illness or anxiety, we are all in it together – with God. Baptism does not guarantee us a way out of the struggle and strife; it guarantees us companionship.

So, welcome to the river, welcome to the company of all faithful people – crazy cousin John and all the rest. We can never fall out of the everlasting arms of love. Amen.