

Note Before Worship : Recently a noted UCC pastor, liturgist, and hymn-writer by the name of Ruth C. Duck passed away. Ruth's materials often appear in our bulletin, and her words are often used to help us to open up our hearts and minds as we begin our worship. Ruth's hymn-writing is committed to inclusiveness, as she creatively explores new ways of celebrating God's presence in our lives and the world. As a tribute to her, we will be singing three of her hymns in this service, as well as using a Call to Worship and Prayer of Invocation that appear in her liturgical resource, "Touch Holiness."

Sermon: This past week, we had the opportunity to see the members of a very exclusive club seated together in the front rows of the Washington Cathedral, individuals who had been elevated by the American people from 'ordinary citizen' to 'President of the United States of America.' They were seated together at the funeral of another 'ordinary citizen' who had been exalted by the American people, President Jimmy Carter, who was being eulogized for - among other qualities - his humble and ordinary ways of living and being.

Even as I watched the service - and found myself longing for political leadership that was similarly dedicated to honesty, Christian character, and ethical living - I was thinking about our Gospel Lesson for today and its focus on an important moment in the life of Jesus - his public baptism. In Luke's telling of the baptism of Jesus, we catch a glimpse of Jesus the ordinary citizen - the 'Mediterranean Peasant' as biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan likes to say - who is standing in a long line in the wilderness with others, awaiting baptism for the repentance of sins. This is a very different picture of Jesus from the one found in first two chapters of Luke, often read at Christmas, who is there described as Israel's ideal ruler and long-awaited Messiah. The Jesus we find in Luke 3 is an ordinary 30ish man humbly standing in line awaiting a ritual intended for sinful human beings. Luke doesn't describe the moment of baptism, or tell us who baptized Jesus (John, according to Luke, is already in prison), but he does describe what happens after the baptism. According to Luke, the heaven opened, "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."" The ordinary citizen carpenter Jesus receives an extraordinary affirmation from heaven - 'You are my Son, my beloved.' Let's pause just a moment, imagining that voice in our own ears, feeling the power of words spoken not by a human parent, but by a voice from heaven publicly declaring love and pride in you - God's own offspring.

As I sat writing this sermon, I found myself wondering how often I had said something like that to our sons and daughters. Probably not very often, I thought, and so I sent each of them a brief note, echoing this reading from Luke, telling them of our love for them, and our pride in who they've become. It's a message I'm sure they have not heard from me often enough, and a word I seldom heard from my own parents. And each of them responded with a brief message of gratitude, saying that it felt really good to hear those words coming from their parents.

Jesus is the beloved Son of God, Luke and the other Gospel writers declare. But we sometimes forget that they will go on to say in a variety of voices and types of literature that we, too, are children of God, beloved and worthy. It is one of the joys we find in reflecting on the Gospel; one of the reasons why the message of Jesus is called Good News. Over and over again, the Gospel declares that we are beloved of God. It's the one message that they insist on telling us; a message we can't hear often enough! Let's be sure to take that message to heart, hiding it deep within the recesses of our self-understanding, a source of strength when buffeted by the challenges of life.

Readers of the Gospel of Matthew and Luke will know that the naming of individuals is important to these writers. Matthew gives us an extensive genealogy for Jesus, naming the names of Jesus' ancestors. In Luke, we read that Zechariah is told to name his son John, rather than Zechariah as would be the custom of the day for naming one's first-born. Mary is told to name her son Jesus, rather than Joseph as would be their custom. They must bear these names, the angels say, for they are appropriate to who they are and who they will become.

Maya Lin, designer of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., was explaining to a TV interviewer why her remarkable work has come to have such a strong grip upon the emotions of the American people. "It's the names," she said, "the names are the memorial. No edifice or structure can bring people to mind as powerfully as their names." I think she is right, and her words bring to mind my own visit to the Memorial and my search for the name of a school classmate whose life had been lost on a battle-field in Vietnam. Seeing and touching the letters of his name on the wall felt like a connection to him, and allowed for a moment of grief at the loss of young precious life.

I am in the midst of reading Winfred Rembert's book, *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South*. In his book, we read of the life of a gifted young man - a person of color, like Jesus; a member of the peasant class, again like Jesus; a gifted young man who comes to understand early in life that he has two sets of names, and two realities to adapt to. In one reality his name is either 'Boy' (You!, boy!) or, more often, (You!, 'N!) a six-letter word starting with N that should never ever be spoken by any white person. In this reality his response to any white person's question or request must always be 'Yes, sir/ma'am' with eyes down-cast, never ever daring to look directly at the person making the request lest the white person take offense, and one's life be placed in danger of injury or death. The shadow of Emit Till hung heavily over Winfred Rembert's early years.

In young Winfred's other reality, he is among his own - people of color where his name Winfred is proudly and loudly spoken, where his gifts as dancer and visual artist are cultivated and celebrated, and where at least one person - his beloved Patsy - will call him 'beloved' (his parents are rarely present in his early life). The book recounts his young life in an era and in a place where persons of color could only rarely be known as beloved human beings, and respected as gifted children of God. While I can't imagine what it would be like to be raised in a world like Winfred Rembert's Jim Crow

south, where one's name means nothing to the majority, and my life means little more; I do remember being raised in a fundamentalist world where I regularly heard it said that children were to 'be seen but not heard', and where parents were taught, 'spare the rod and spoil the child.' Such a low view of the value of young life has a way of hobbling a child's sense of self-worth, and hindering the eventual adult's ability to hear in the Gospel the good news, 'you are my child, my beloved, and with you I am well pleased!'

In today's Gospel we read that after Jesus is baptized, the heaven was opened and a voice was heard saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This Son of Heaven went on to have an extraordinary ministry in the world, teaching and preaching, and showing God's love to the people most often rejected by society and the church - the lepers living in leper colonies outside of the village; the 'sinful' woman scorned by her villagers and forced to go to the town well in the noon-day heat to avoid their gaze; the tax-collectors hated for their collaboration with the Roman government and their tendency to enrich themselves at the expense of their own; and so many more. And, in each generation God seems to find people who will similarly offer compassionate ministry to the 'wretched and despised' of the earth, the people whose 'backs are against the wall' (to use Howard Thurman's phrase); the people whose lives have fallen apart. The people of our own generation, even in this very affluent country, have many needs - among the greatest is the need to know we are loved - and I like to think that God is still looking for ordinary people, people attuned to the voice of God's Spirit, who might be willing to take risks to offer God's love to God's beloved people.

At one of the pastor's groups I've participated in, we talked about the way in which God chooses people for God's work of sharing love. We talked about the men and women who have had such a positive influence on our world; men like Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King, Jr.; women like Mother Teresa, Helen Keller, and Sojourner Truth. We spoke of Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, and the inspiration for an organization dedicated to building affordable housing for low-income folk. Millard was a construction business owner who gave away everything to care for the poor of the world. An amazing story (and thank you, Rhu and Burett, for sharing his work with us today)! In our conversation, we clergy wondered why God chooses the little people, the people of no other influence or significance to make the world a better and more hospitable place. You would think God might choose one of us - God's pastor friends, the religious professionals - who have all the theological training and counselling courses; but no, we don't seem to be on God's list of people who get things done! You might expect God to tap a few of the nation's newly minted billionaires, who have resources and powerful friends and the ear of elected officials. But they're not the ones God chooses, either. It's the ordinary folk - the Rosa Parks, the Bayard Rustins, the Mother Teresas . . . and some of you sitting in these pews - the Beloved of God, who will listen to God's call and will do a good job.

"Beloved"
Luke 3:15-22

One that day long ago, Jesus came to John to be baptized. As he rose up out of the water, the heavens opened, and a voice was heard saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." May we hear that same voice in our own ears, and may we receive it into our hearts. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May God look upon you with kindness and give you peace.

Let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Property of Reverend Richard Slater