
You Are My Beloved

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The First Sunday After The Epiphany: The Baptism of Christ

"You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased." Luke 3:22

How is it that children can cause us adults to be so illogical? Perfectly logical grown men and women change our lives around, cast care to the wind, cancel plans and meetings, so that we can be with a child (and especially with a grandchild!). That's reasonable enough, of course.

It is when a baby is born, that our reactions become stunningly unreasonable. Notice, for instance, when a baby is born, how that baby immediately commands the attention of everyone in the community. Notes and letters arrive. Gifts arrive. Friends and family want to see a photograph. "Do you have a picture," they ask. "When can we see a picture?"

These days, that baby picture appears almost immediately on our cell phones; soon afterwards, it is posted and floating through the cyberspace heavens on Facebook. After the posting, the comments arrive. "Oh, she's beautiful. She looks just like her mother. He's handsome. He's beautiful. I love him! Why, that's the most beautiful baby in the world."

"Yes," his parents agree. "We love him. He is the most beautiful baby in the world."

Well, it's the last line that makes me pause. "Beautiful" is fine. But, "most beautiful in the world" ? How do you figure that?

Even parents have to admit, logically, that there is no way we can measure or justify that statement. Can we line up all the babies in the world and determine who is the prettiest, or who is the most loved? Even parents have to admit that impossibility.

But, of course, we parents don't admit that! We don't agree with that impossibility at all. Something else is speaking in us. This baby, this child, is not only beautiful, but he is also the most beautiful baby *in the world*. And she is loved, too. She is the most beloved child *in the world*.

What we mean by that is nothing logical or measurable at all. We mean that this child touches us at a place of love that cannot be measured at all. Our commitment, and our love, goes beyond ordinary language, and the ordinary world. For us, she is the *only* one!

We have to exaggerate! It's the only way to express true love. We have to defy ordinary logic. And it's important for babies to hear that exaggeration. It is important for children to hear that prodigal disregard for ordinary logic, that lavish praise cast upon only them.

Try to remember back when you were an infant. What was it like to have face after face peering down at you in the crib,

and then to hear the words, "You are lovely! You are the most beautiful baby in the world. I love you more than anything." Those voices must have sounded so big and huge to us when we were babies, voices that seemed to come down out of nowhere to us as we lay helpless in that stroller. Those voices were coming from heaven!

What? Can you not remember those voices? Can you not hear them today? They are speaking today.

Jesus was much older than an infant when he was baptized. He was probably around thirty years old, and his baptism may have also been a very adult political act. When Jesus came up out of the water, a voice boomed out from the heavens. Some heard it, and others did not. Some say the voice was addressed directly to Jesus, and some say it was addressed to the crowd.

The voice said something like, "You are my son, my beloved; in you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). Others thought the voice said, "This is my son, my beloved; in him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). The details don't really matter, if we are willing to let our spirits overwhelm logic for a moment. The details don't matter. The voice was from heaven; it was the voice of God.

"You are my beloved!"

Those are the most important words this child being baptized today will hear. Indeed, those are the most important words that any of us can ever say: "You are my beloved."

This baby that we baptize today is the most beautiful baby *in the world!* He, and the other babies we baptized earlier today, are beloved, not just by parents and godparents, but by this church, by this community of faith. They are beloved of God. They are the most beautiful babies in the world.

And, really, those are the most important words that you can say to anyone, ever, in the whole world. "You are my beloved."

People sometimes critique the Apostles' Creed, one of our Christian statements of faith, when they hear us say, "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord." How can we say Jesus is the "only" Son of God, when we acknowledge that there are really lots of children of God? Isn't that presumptuous, almost illogical? Isn't that exclusivist?

Yes, of course it is, if we are speaking only in the ordinary, logical world. But we are not. We are talking about someone we love, someone we believe in. Something extraordinary happens when we tell someone they are loved.

When we tell someone that we believe in them, when we tell someone they are loved, then they are the most loved person in the world. They are the only person for us.

It has to do with the quality of love. Love, true love, is never restricted to something that can be measured. Love doesn't have different degrees of strength. Love is not a zero sum game, so that if I give more, then there's not enough to go around for someone else.

No. In fact, love has the power to recreate itself. Whenever we love someone, we actually create more love to go around.

Today, we baptize new Christians. However, it is not simply water that baptizes a person. The water in the Jordan River was holy for Jesus, but it was not magic. The water we use this morning is holy, but it is not magic.

It's not just the water that baptizes a person. It's the words. Words are what baptize a person. The word of love baptizes a person. The baptism of Jesus was complete when that word boomed from the heavens, "You are my son, my beloved. In you I am well pleased."

Today, we say the same thing. To this baby, and to children everywhere: "You are my son, my daughter, my beloved; in you I am well pleased."

To our families, to our friends, to our lovers. It's the most important thing we can ever say: "You are my beloved, the most loved person in the world."

AMEN.

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