

Blest Be the Tie That Binds
Mark 1: 4-11

Tomorrow is the day we remember and honor the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a pastor turned civil rights activist whose words and actions sparked a turning in this country, a movement that is being reborn today. "Our goal is to create a beloved community," he wrote, "and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives."¹ A beloved community in our world today seems difficult at best. Impossible is more fitting. Look at all the need in the world - the hunger, the hurt, the ill and dying, the damaged - and try to figure out where to even begin. Listen to the hate that spews from all corners - hate of difference, hate of other, hate. Try to counter each expression of hatred. It's impossible; it's debilitating; it's exhausting. We stand at a crossroads, looking back at the past with all its glorious success and its abysmal failure. We stand paralyzed in the pain of the present, overwhelmed, unsure which direction to go. We can't even look to the future. It is clouded, unknown, unattainable. Though we see the glaring need to be the quantitative change of which Dr. King spoke, we don't know what to do. Then we hear the story of Jesus' baptism. We hear the voice of God, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."² Slowly, it begins to seep into our souls that we are Beloved as well. It is there our journey begins, not in a litany of tasks to be accomplished, but in the quantitative change in our souls that we are loved by God.

We are called to community. It's part of the deepest hunger of our souls. From the beginning of time, the stories of the people of God center in our great need to be connected with one another. Whether it be with the creation story and the relationship of Adam and Eve or the rise of the people of Israel as a nation, it is clear that we were made to be with others. When Jesus walked into the world, all of history was placed on a new trajectory, including the meaning

¹ "Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom," Martin Luther King, Jr., May 4, 1966.

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/nonviolence-the-only-road-to-freedom/>

² Mark 1: 11 NRSV

of community. *Koinwvía* became the connection pervading all of life from social structure to economic justice. In the life of Jesus, that community was defined. As with so much that emanated from him, it was nothing like the world had ever witnessed. For the people of Jesus' time community was not gathering in synagogue to listen and learn. It was not to be with people who were just like them. It was a radical shift in the concept of togetherness as the people of God, one we are still struggling to realize, and yet one that is inseparable from our faith. For us today community is not merely coming together week after week to worship, to enjoy one another, to even serve others. Community is more, so much more, and it finds its life source and center in the very love of God, in our being called 'beloved'.

From this moment of baptism with John, Jesus stepped from the waters of the Jordan River into his life's mission to build the community of God's own love. He began to call the disciples, Simon, Andrew, James, and John, to walk alongside him as he became God's love for the world. Real people with whom he lived, sharing the burdens of the day, enjoying meals together, discerning where to go next, praying, learning - all the vast complexities of life with one another. His life became the model for our own. We, too, strive to surround ourselves with people with whom we share our lives and our life's work. Indeed, that is not only the nature of individual communities of faith but the Church in this world. Yet as we look to Jesus for who we are to be and how to live, we must always circle back to this moment of baptism when God's love broke into the world and into our hearts. We are loved. It is as simple and as complex as that - we have been called beloved by God.

As I wrote, I found it very difficult to simply rest in the love of God that became real for us all in Jesus. Everything in me wanted to go a different direction, to listen to Dr. King's cries for engagement, to respond to the hateful rhetoric of the day, to even lash out in fearful anger of what is happening in the world. I was going to tell you about the evolution of baptism from a Jewish rite of purification to the present view. I was going to tell you all about the gospel of Mark, what is so startlingly unique about it, and its call to a new community. I even had quite the

list of quotes from Dr. King calling us to engagement in this world of injustice. I was quite the whirling dervish of information married to a passionate call to action. Yet in learning more and more about King, whose zeal for justice sparked a movement that is rising yet again, I have come to the realization that all he did was rooted in the awareness of being loved by God and *that* was the source of his life's purpose. As the author of the first letter of John wrote, "Beloved, *since God loved us so much*, let us love one another."³ God's love is the beginning, the end, and everything in between in the journey of our lives.

So for today, in spite of all that is happening in the world, there will be no call to radical action, no admonishment to get out there and change the world. For today, let us rest in the firm and certain knowledge of God's love for you, for us all. That is so very, very difficult for us as a society of doers, of people who are more comfortable with action plans and agendas than existing in the moment. Yet it was that love to which Jesus would return time and time again throughout the joys and challenges of his walk on this earth, not the strategic plan for his ministry. It is the same love that takes deep root in our souls, giving us the courage to be and to live. It is a love that weaves us all together wherever we may go, whatever we might be, however we might live, creating belonging, creating home. It is a love that becomes real at our baptism. In her book *The Runaway Bunny*, Margaret Wise Brown wrote of a bunny who wanted to flee from home but found he could never evade the love of his mother. The mother told the young rabbit, "If you become a bird and fly away from me, I will be a tree that you come home to."⁴ That is baptism - the tree that we come home to, the covenant of God's love that is always with us, always holding, always forming, always joining us together for all eternity. This love is not ethereal or unreachable, because this is a love that becomes authentic in the very real, very tangible community that is our life together. It is through our love for one another that we know God's love for us. *We* become the embodiment of God's love. That love will take many forms,

³ 1 John 4: 11 NRSV

⁴ Margaret Wise Brown. *The Runaway Bunny*. Harper Collins. 2017. First published 1942.

call us to daring new ventures, surprise us with its demands and its joys. But we can't fully go down that road until we receive that love as our own. The community of God begins in the knowing that we are immeasurably loved. Sometimes, just sometimes, we need to lean back into the promise of baptism that we, each one of us, as we are before we have done anything at all, we are beloved as well.

We thrive in love. Studies have demonstrated time and again that people become the best of themselves when they know they are loved. Being loved reduces anxiety, lowers blood pressure, increases productivity. When children do not know love, it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to love as adults creating problems ranging from social discomfort and isolation to profound mental problems.⁵ We were created to be loved and to love in return. Our baptism is God's visible sign of that love, a sign that we reenact every time someone is baptized. Yet it tends to be moved to the background of our memories rather than the center of our existence. It becomes a day that happened a long time ago and not the force that shapes all our lives. We focus on what we need to learn and do, minimizing the immeasurable impact of God's love and the community that is created through it.

Hildegard of Bingen was an 11th century Benedictine abbess, who was remarkable in the vast diversity of her talents. Known as the founder of scientific natural history in Germany, she also left the world with a prolific legacy that included some of the oldest known liturgical dramas, morality plays, music, poetry. She even constructed her own language! Yet it was her visionary theology of a profound connection to God that is perhaps one of her greatest gifts to the world. Listen now to her words that carry within them the very essence of baptism, the knowledge of being loved:

Good people,
Most royal greening verdancy,
Rooted in the sun,
You shine with radiant light.
In this circle of earthly existence

⁵ <http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/bonding.htm>

You shine so finely.
 It surpasses understanding.
 God hugs you.
 You are encircled by the arms
 of the mystery of God.⁶

'You are encircled by the arms of the mystery of God.' With those words in your heart, close your eyes a moment and relax. Let the Word of God pour over you. 'You are my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' Bask in that moment, let it seep deep into your soul. You are loved. [silence for a bit] Look within yourself and sense the peace that comes from knowing you are loved. Now open your eyes and look at those around you who heard those same words, who experienced for themselves the irresistible sense of God's love flooding them as well. With the knowledge that we are each one loved like that, do you feel a sense of connection that might not have been there? That is the power of your baptism.

Let us pray.

Most holy God, it is staggering when we try to understand your love for us. Yet your love is the core of our being, our heart's very substance. In baptism you remind us we find life itself in your love. You, the creator of the universe, have called us each beloved. No matter how dark our world might appear, no matter the overwhelming tasks that loom before us, no matter the confusion and uncertainty that might cloud our hearts and minds, let us never forget that love. Through all the moments of our living, help us to hold on to you and your love. Then, in the knowledge of that love for us, help us to choose love in all our ways and to become your beloved community for the world. Because of Jesus Christ who came so that we might know you more fully we pray. Amen.

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 Sackets Harbor, New York
 January 14, 2018

⁶ *Life Prayers from Around the World*. Edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon. HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.

