

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on January 12, 2020 (Baptism of Our Lord, Year A)*

When my kids were young, we spent a lot of time at the town pool in Briarcliff Manor, New York. It was centrally located, affordable, and during those summer months it turned into something of a town square. Everyone was there, from leather-skinned ladies still tanning with baby oil, to teenagers strutting around in hormone-driven packs, to middle-aged dads sucking in their guts, to throngs of young children playing Marco Polo in the shallow end.

What I remember most about those years, besides being incredibly jealous of parents with older kids who could actually spend the day reading, was hanging out with the boys while they frolicked in the kiddie pool. Every jump, every attempt to blow bubbles, every time they reached down below the surface to retrieve a coin was accompanied by a “Hey, dad! Watch this!” or “Look at me!” The need for parental affirmation was just so blatant.

Those of you who are parents of young children, or who remember those days, know that the search for affirmation comes without any subtlety at all. Children want recognition for their accomplishments and they want it *right now*. Whether it’s the latest picture drawn at the kitchen table or those early bike rides without the training wheels or learning to play chopsticks on the piano, the action is immediately followed with an upward glance to make sure that you’re not only watching but approving.

Of course, over time the search for affirmation gets more subtle. Eventually it evolves into that strange push/pull thing where they want the affirmation, but at the same time they don’t actually want to be in the same room with you.

And, not to turn this into a glorified therapy session, but parental affirmation is something we still all crave at one level. The shadows of our mothers and fathers — biological or adopted, alive or dead — can loom large over our entire lives, in ways that are both life-giving and destructive. In ways that can impact the entire trajectory of our existence, vocationally and relationally and in so many of the choices we make.

At one level the baptism of Jesus is all about parental affirmation. Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan, the heavens open, the Spirit descends upon him like a dove, and God declares, “This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” And, ultimately, isn’t that the parental affirmation we all seek? First as children and then later in more complex ways as adults. “With you I am well pleased.” That’s really all we want to hear. To know at the very core of our being that we are loved and cared for and that we matter.

Now, we don’t know much about Jesus’ childhood. Presumably he had those kiddie pool-type interactions with Mary and Joseph in his early years. Taking his first steps with a big grin on his face and looking up for affirmation; successfully manipulating a hammer in his father’s workshop; reading a line of Scripture for the first time. Those are all precious moments that were surely treasured by Jesus’ earthly parents and stored in the memory box of their minds.

Yet part of our spiritual maturity is letting go of the expectations of others — whether peer or parent — and seeking the only thing that really matters in this life: divine affirmation. Through his baptism, Jesus takes on the mantle of Messiah. God affirms Jesus’ role in the unfolding plan of salvation, and he is sent forth to live into his identity not as the carpenter’s son but as the Son of God. And in that moment

in the waters of the Jordan, Jesus also lets go of the earthly expectations and affirmation-seeking behavior that defines so much of the human condition. He submits to this baptism and he offers himself fully and forever to the service of his divine parent.

“With you I am well pleased.” The amazing thing about these words of affirmation is that Jesus hasn’t done anything yet! His public ministry begins immediately after his baptism. Before his hair is even dry, Jesus is driven out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan, a testing of sorts, and then his whirlwind ministry begins. And yet God is already pleased with him. Not for what he’s done or what he will do, but simply for who he is as a creature wonderfully and lovingly made in God’s image.

And I think this says much about God. Whatever we do or fail to do, God is well pleased with us. That’s the baseline. When it comes to God’s interaction with humanity, love is God’s default position. We’re so quick to build upon our own self-doubts that we often forget just how much God loves us simply for being our unique selves.

Yes, there are differences between Jesus’ baptism and our own. It’s harder to “die to sin” when you’re sinless. And there’s no voice from heaven anointing us as the Messiah. But there are parallels that link the baptism of our Lord to the baptism of you and me and Sienna. And that is the indelible affirmation of God’s love that never fades away. We may and do fail, we may and do make a mess of things. And yet God’s love for us is so perfect and so complete and so absolute, that it can never, ever be washed away

At his baptism, Jesus is affirmed as God’s *Son*. Not his friend or proxy or messenger, but as his very own substance. In the person of Jesus Christ, God’s very self has entered the world and this moment in the Jordan confirms the relationship. And it’s important to remember that we are all children of God. *Children*. That’s very deliberate terminology that makes us not just followers of Jesus but his siblings. There is a profound, intimate connection of relationship between us and our Lord, through baptism, that can never be undone.

God looks upon us with the same love a parent gazes upon a child in a kiddie pool. But the baseline affirmation is without expectation or strings. That’s not to say that there isn’t a cost to discipleship. For Jesus, this divine affirmation is offered just as he begins his difficult mission of bringing salvation to the world. He’ll encounter hardship and skepticism, anger and hatred. It is not an easy path. And divine affirmation will be offered again in the story of the Transfiguration, just before Jesus heads to Jerusalem to set in motion the events leading to his crucifixion. In the presence of Peter, James, and John, God proclaims, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.”

For all of us, this divine affirmation begins not in the waters of the kiddie pool, but through the waters of baptism. For Jesus, for me, for you. And today serves as a reminder that God’s loving affirmation is constant and unwavering and indelible. With you, God is well pleased.