

Matthew 3:13-17

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

THE HEAVENS ARE OPENED

I guess it was about ten years ago that James, Hyesun and I took a trip to Indiana as part of a Schaeffer family reunion, and part of our itinerary during that trip was a visit to the Farnham House in the town of Fremont, where my father was born, and, in fact, died. The man who build the house, Erastus Farnham, was a staunch abolitionist, and as I learned during our private tour, used his home as to hide runaway slaves who were migrating north through the Underground Railroad. Farnham had designed the house with several features in order to accommodate the runaway slaves – he placed a cupola on the roof of the house served as a lookout post for both the slaves and those pursuing the slaves. He also installed an internal cistern, that collected rainwater from the gutters in order to increase the home's water supply without provoking suspicion from the posses who were in search of runaway slaves. The house has several secret rooms and chambers to help hide the slaves. Sojourner Truth, an ex-slave and abolitionist, stayed at the house during a speaking tour after the Civil War had ended.

What intrigued me most about this tour of the Farnham house was the knowledge that the Schaeffer family was connected to the Farnham family in an indirect way; the tour guide knew the Schaeffer family lineage and explained how there was this connection, and when I learned this, I suddenly felt a little swelling of pride. Not a bad pride, but a good pride, from knowing that somewhere in my lineage was a man who took a courageous stand against human slavery and risked his own life to stand up for what was right. This also prompted me to do a little more research on the Schaeffer history, during which I learned how my great great grandfather, John Schaeffer, had come to Indiana from Pennsylvania, had

married and worked hard to build a farm for his family, had converted to Methodism when he was 37 years old, and had gained a reputation as a good father, a good neighbor, and a hard worker. He died at the ripe old age of 84. His funeral was well-attended and included a quartet that sang the appropriate hymns, and he was laid to rest in Fremont Cemetery, where my father, John Schaeffer, his great grandson, was laid to rest four years ago.

I mention this because, in Fremont, Indiana, it's a good thing to be a Schaeffer. There is power in that name in that community. It's not the same power that is associated with the name Kennedy or Roosevelt or Carnegie, but in Fremont, Indiana it still carries weight.

Today's story about Jesus' baptism reminds us that in baptism we are also given a name that matters, and that name is "Beloved."

If you examine the different denominational beliefs on Baptism you will be amazed, or perhaps appalled, by the differences, which have led to a lot of confusion about baptism. In the third and fourth centuries we find that many Christians believed that formal baptism was essential for our salvation. Furthermore, since baptism washed away sin, many adults chose to postpone baptism until the last minute to ensure that there would be no post-baptismal sins that would interfere with their salvation; Emperor Constantine waited until he was dying to be baptized. Saint Augustine records in his *Confessions* that one of his friends who was gravely ill submitted to baptism only to recover shortly thereafter; Augustine joked with his friend believing that now he couldn't sin anymore. Some denominations don't recognize another denomination's baptism, thus requiring people who enter their church to go through a whole ceremony again.

I have to confess that I am a Christian pragmatist, as well as a firm advocate of God's love and God's amazing grace. So I have to ask myself, "Would God close the doors of salvation on anyone who was not formally baptized in water?" Because if he did close the doors, I'd have to question his love and grace, which I believe to be unconditional. And while I don't believe that there are penalties for not being baptized, there certainly are benefits that come with being baptized, the same way that being a Schaeffer in Fremont Indiana has its benefits. We are identified as God's beloved.

It's not that anyone is not beloved by God, but we are specifically NAMED as God's beloved. When we are baptized, "the heavens are opened" in the sense that God reaches down and blesses the one being baptized, Just as they were when Jesus was baptized, and God declares to the one being baptized, "You are my beloved," just as he declared to Jesus. I'll speak more of this in two weeks when Ava is baptized, but in baptism we are NAMED as God's beloved. I don't know if Ava is going to undergo an internal religious experience in two weeks, though I think she has already begun to speak in tongues. But I know, that as she grows older, as she is reminded that she has been baptized, she will be reminded that she is beloved by God. She will be reminded by her parents of that every day, as they reflect God's love to her. She'll be reminded, as we do the same, and if and when she ever moves away from Staten Island, she will be reminded wherever she goes by the fact that she is Christian, and that once upon a time her parents brought her before God and God's people to be blessed, to be formally declared *beloved by God*.

Because being beloved by God is not something that can ever be undone. Once you are part of God's family, you are never disowned. I think that the Parable of the Prodigal Son offers us a good illustration of how baptism works. I believe we all know that parable; there is a father with two sons, and the younger son one day says to his father, "give me my inheritance now, so I can leave and live my life the way I want to live it." And even though, in that day and in that culture, such a request would have been considered an insult to the father – it would be like the son saying "I wish you were dead right now" – the father nonetheless complies and gives his son what he asks for. The son goes and squanders his inheritance and ends up impoverished and eating no better than pigs. Things get so bad that he decides to go back home and beg his father to hire him as one of his servants. And Jesus says that, as the son was approaching, the father saw him from a great distance, *ran* to him, embraced him, kissed him, and had the servants bring him a robe, sandals, and a ring. The ring is important because the ring identified him as part of that family and had all the privileges of that family. The son thought that he had lost such privilege on account of his impertinence, but the father had always considered him his son, his beloved. This is God's way, as shown in this parable, and as shown in the life of Jesus, that unconditional welcome, that recognition that once you're part of the family, you're *always* part of the family.

And we, the church, are to be of the same mind, offering the same unconditional welcome, the same grace, that God offers us. We may come back to the church pleading for forgiveness and asking simply to be a servant, but the body of Christ welcomes us back as family, the same way the community of Fremont Indiana would consider me family just for the fact that my last name is Schaeffer. We live in a world where people like to assign names. He's a democrat, she's a republican, she's a liberal, they're environmentalists, they're veterans, etc. Those names are important to the people who bear them. They can be sources of great pride and identity. They define who we associate with. Well, if you are a Christian, that name 'Christian' should be the name you bear above all other names. It reminds you not only who you are but *whose* you are. You are forever beloved by God. And knowing that will enable you to do far greater things than you may have ever imagined. If you open your Bible and read the verses that immediately follow today's story of Jesus' baptism, you read that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he was tested. This happens *after* Jesus is named, identified as *beloved*. Life is full of trials and tests. It's important that we remember who we are as we face those tests.

And when we remember our names, that we are beloved, that we belong to the family of God, we are more likely to live into our heritage. My great great grandfather John Schaeffer was remembered as a hard worker who loved his family and trusted in God. I can see that in his great grandson, my father, and I as I claim that heritage I also take pride in that inheritance; I too strive to work hard, to love my family, and to trust in God, so that those who come after me also live into that name and that heritage.