

Mark 1:4-11

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." ⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

FRIENDED BY GOD

So how many Facebook friends do you have? Do you know them all, or do you just "friend" a friend of a friend? For those of you who may not know what I'm talking about, Facebook was the true genesis of social media. Facebook is the reason that the word "friend" is now a verb. For those of you who *still* don't know what I'm talking about, **social media is the reason you see so many people spending so much time** with their smartphones and tablets and laptop computers. It's not the *only* reason, but social media has exploded in popularity in the last few decades; there's Facebook and Twitter and Tumblr and Instagram and Youtube and what else?

Some folks complain about how so many young folks are addicted to such things, but as much as we complain that our children's heads seem to be forever cast downward toward the screen of their cell phone, there is a **very positive side to social media; it does connect people**. I was amazed to learn that, as a teenager my son was playing a computer game with people from all over the world. Every once in a while I get "friend" requests from people I haven't contacted in years, and occasionally I will send a request to someone that I know because Facebook has suggested that I "friend" that person. The more connected we are to social media, the more we are in contact with other people. Before we had this vehicle to broadcast our likes, dislikes, our favorite books and movies, we usually shared that information one person at a time through private conversation; now everyone broadcasts it publicly for the entire world to see.

Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and Tumblr are all **testimony that we humans are social beings**. We like to be in contact with one another, even though electronic contact is not the same as face-to-face, the contact is still a very positive thing. **But Facebook and other social media point out a human weakness as well; we have a need to be liked**. When you look up your friends on Facebook you are informed how many "friends" they have on Facebook, and I certainly notice when my friends have more friends than I do. When we "post" something on Facebook, people respond how much they "like" what we posted, and I'll bet you'd wonder why 98 people "liked" one of your posts while only 27 people "liked" another post. We like to have friends, and we like to be liked. We like to be affirmed. It makes us feel like we fit in.

Fitting in is all about conforming to someone else's expectations; teenagers take strides to change their appearance in order to fit in; children compete over how they are ranked as a friend; are we a close friend, a best friend, or "just a friend"? Grownups do the same thing to some extent. We want to be liked, and we change what we say or wear or do in order to be more liked, to gain the positive regard of others.

I dare say that we think of God in the same way we think of other people, feeling a need to say or do things in order to be more accepted by God, more liked by God. We feel “unworthy” of his love and strive to be perfect so as to earn that love. We may even view church the same way, feeling like we don’t “fit in” unless we purge ourselves of all sin and vice. We come to church on our best behavior to “fit in,” because we want others to like us.

Which is why baptism is so important. Baptism is not something we do in order to be more liked by God or more accepted by the church, as if God doesn’t like people who aren’t baptized, as if people who aren’t baptized are not welcome in the church. God loves all people, and the doors of the church are open to anyone who wishes to come in. But baptism is an affirmation of that love and that unconditional acceptance. Baptism is such an important event because, whether you are baptized as a child or as an adult, you or your family are reminded that God accepts you and that the church accepts you not *because* you are baptized but just because God is who he is.

In today’s gospel lesson, as John is baptizing Jesus, God says to Jesus, “You are my son. With you I am well pleased.” Jesus, at this point, has done nothing that we know about. He’s been born, he’s been presented at the temple. Everything has been happening *to* him because he’s a child. Aside from a little blurb in Luke’s Gospel about Jesus talking to the teachers at the temple, we don’t know of anything that Jesus himself has done, but God is well-pleased with him. Why?

At first I thought it was because Jesus has been baptized, but as I thought about it I realized that I was wrong. Is God *not* pleased with people who are not baptized? Of course not. But baptism opens us up to God’s grace, and one way, perhaps the most important way we experience God’s grace is by knowing that we are accepted by God for who you are, wherever you are, despite your imperfection.

It’s important that we get this point early in life, because it can influence everything else in life. Again, look at Jesus as an example. It’s immediately after his baptism that Jesus goes and spends forty days in the wilderness, where he is tempted by Satan. I don’t know how you understand evil – as a force, as a mental condition, or as the work of some red creature with horns and a pitchfork, but Mark writes that Jesus is tempted by Satan. And how does Satan tempt him? Satan wants Jesus to prove to Satan who he is. He says, “*If* you are the Son of God...” Satan is saying, “I will accept that you are the Son of God *if* you do these things.” But Jesus has just heard God say to him, “You are my beloved Son, and in you I am well pleased” and so has no need to prove anything to anyone.

Because Jesus knows that he is beloved by God, he can spend his whole life communicating God’s acceptance to others, healing and teaching and welcoming those who others would not welcome. Much later, when Jesus’ very life is on the line, he will be tempted once again, this time by King Herod, to perform some feat to prove that he is who he says he is, and once again Jesus will resist such a temptation, trusting that he is indeed, beloved by God, trusting to the point of death. And God affirms that Jesus is indeed beloved by God. He affirms it in the resurrection. God continues to accept and honor Jesus as his own beloved Son.

And so, too, at our lowest moments, we too may draw courage and strength and peace in knowing that we too are beloved of God. Baptism doesn’t make us beloved; but baptism is the visible sign that we are beloved. That’s why, when things are falling apart around us, we should remember our baptism. That’s why, despite how others may attack us or diminish us or reject us or ignore us, or even “unfriend” us, we can know that we are always and forever beloved by God.