

¹³Then 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."

When I was young we had a Springer Spaniel named Belle. I liked to dance with Belle – picking up her front paws and gliding around the porch together. Belle raced to fetch whatever I threw. Belle went with me wherever I wandered on our farm but she was especially fond of journeys to the creek where she could splash and dash and roll in the mud. But the thing I remember most about Belle was her delight in seeing me – after a day of school she would greet me with leaps and licks and a tail that just could not stop wagging. It did not matter to her how my day had gone – whether the teacher was happy with my work or made me stay after school for detention. Belle never asked me about my report card, or how many baskets I made in a game. Always her joy in me lifted my spirit.

I thought of Belle as I pondered the voice from heaven declaring of Jesus, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." I have always thought these words were spoken at the wrong time. God should have waited until Easter – then these words would have made perfect sense. After Jesus had proved himself faithful in following where the Father led – daily trusting in his Father in heaven, calling upon his Father in every time of need, loving and helping all who came to him, obediently drinking the cup of suffering that was his death on the cross – after Jesus had done all of this God could have declared, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." But instead God made this declaration at the beginning, immediately following Jesus baptism. God declared that God was pleased with Jesus before Jesus had taught a single teaching, or done a single miracle, or even said he believed in God.

I like to reserve my judgement about people – I watch and wait to see how someone will perform before I declare my approval. I always assume God is kind of like me in this – waiting to see how we will do before pronouncing the final verdict. But with Jesus the verdict came at the very beginning.

Some would say that God the Father already knew how Jesus would do – knowing that Jesus would be faithful in every way God expresses pleasure in him. I suppose that is possible. But I would like to think that God's delight in Jesus is more like Belle's delight in me. Jesus just plain gave God joy – Jesus himself. God just had to announce it opening the heavens and declaring for all to hear, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." God's delight was in Jesus that day and in every day that could ever come.

What if the same is true with you? Could it be that the Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth has joy in you, declaring that you are God's daughter, God's Son and that God is pleased with you – maybe not always pleased with what you do or what you say – but pleased with you – delighted in you. If it were not true then our habit of baptizing babies and infants or even baptizing twenty or thirty or forty year olds would make no sense. If God is still deciding about you – still not sure whether he wants you at the family table for all eternity – then baptism has no meaning at all. But the truth is God has been pleased to make a place for you at the table – we baptize to have a public declaration of that fact. You belong to God – God delights in you so much that Jesus gave his life for you. Jesus is the one who made a place for you at God's table.

Why did he do it? If God was already pleased with him why did Jesus endure all the exhaustion and the agony of following where the Father led? Maybe because Jesus had as much delight in his Heavenly Father as his Father had in him. Maybe because Jesus loved the Father.

You and I can come to worship God and give our time and our efforts to help our sisters and brothers because we think we can gain something by it.

Or we can worship God and love our neighbors simply because we love Jesus and the Father and the Spirit and love the people God has put in our lives. Does it matter which way it is for us?

Had Belle always been looking for a treat from me I would have felt far differently about her. But for her I was the treat.

It is all about love. In Christ God loved you before you even were – Jesus died on the cross for you when you did not even exist. Is that love of God enough to make a lover out of you? Jesus bet his life that it would be. Amen.