

“The Pearls of Life: Belonging to God”  
Acts 8:9-13

Today as we continue our focus on The Pearls of Life and move to the Baptismal Pearl which is the white one that is supposed to remind us of our being loved by and belonging to God. Baptism is one of two sacraments for us as followers of Jesus. A sacrament is an outward sign of an inward reality of grace. It is something that we can see and feel to help us pay attention to what we can't see with our own eyes and sometimes can't even feel. People throughout the centuries have found baptism to be a powerful experience of the Holy Spirit to remind them of belonging to God. The 16<sup>th</sup> Century Protestant Reformer Martin Luther in his darkest days of rejection by the church, used to go around saying, “I am baptized.” – reminding himself that no matter what went wrong, he would always be loved by God.

It is amazing that even someone as religious as Martin Luther needed to be reminded of his belonging to God. He dedicated his whole life to serving God and yet when problems came his way, he needed something to hold onto just like the rest of us. I am reminded of a baptism scene in the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou*. The three escaped convicts, led by George Clooney, are walking through the woods when suddenly mysterious figures, dressed in white, begin to appear. They are singing a gospel song and walking down to the river. One of the convicts Delmar gets inspired and runs down into the water, pushes his way to the front, and in his dirty brown clothes, gets baptized (show clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PUDD7LBb88>) As he comes up out of the water, he shouts out, “Well, that's it, boys, I been redeemed. The preacher done washed away all my sins and transgressions. It's the straight and narrow from here on out, and heaven everlasting's my reward.” George Clooney says, “Delmar, what are you talking about? We got bigger fish to fry!” Delmar says, “The preacher said all my sins been washed away, including that Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo.” George Clooney says, “I thought you said you was innocent of those charges.” Delmar says, “Well, I was lying and the preacher said that that sin's been washed away too! Neither God nor man's got nothing on me now. Come on in, boys, the water is fine.”

While the scene is a little comical and simplistic, it is a reminder about the power of baptism as a way to recognize that we are loved beyond anything we can imagine. And it is a long process of maturing and living into that reality and that path is full of detours because we live in a world that constantly calls our identity as God's Beloved into question. Think of the many ways this core goodness of who we are comes into question: The first time you had to demonstrate your physical ability in PE at school, the first time we were bullied or teased, the first time you struggled through Math class, the first time you came face to face with human suffering and the vulnerability of life, and every time your parents reflected imperfectly God's love for you. In each of these instances, we internalized the false message that we are not good enough, not worthy of being beloved. In Anne Lamott's book, *Operating Instructions*, she tells how her friend, Father Tom, lists the 5 rules of our society (screen):

- #1. You must not have anything wrong with you or different about you.
- #2. If you do have something wrong or different about you, just get over it as soon as possible.
- #3. If you can't get over it, you must pretend that you have.
- #4. If you can't pretend, you shouldn't show up at all.
- #5. If you are going to show up, if you insist on it, at least have the decency to feel ashamed of yourself.
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We internalize these messages, we begin to feel that we are not worthy, we think maybe we would be worthy if we were a little bit better, a little bit smarter, fit in a little bit better with the expectations of people around us, and our own expectations of ourselves. Sometimes, we try to comfort ourselves through small or large addictions and nothing ever really seems to satisfy us. The good news of faith is that God is able to take all of our imperfections, detours, and struggles and transforms them into new ways to love and to feel loved. The invitation is to allow that to happen.

In our Bible story today, we hear about such a story of transformation. It is about Simon the magician and his baptism. In the book of Acts, we hear about the continuation of the ministry of Jesus after he is gone. I love that the book of Acts shares we hear the stories of ordinary folk becoming extraordinary through the power of God in their lives. One of the main themes in the Book of Acts is the collection of peculiar people that God assembles to be the foundation of the church. In addition to the 12 disciples, we hear about a murderer (Paul), a Roman soldier and his household, a jailer and his family, a businesswoman (Lydia) and her family and servants, and a couple of lying followers of Jesus (Ananias and Saphira). And so today's story adds to this list of people who were unlikely to become followers of Jesus, but who end up following him anyway despite all the barriers and challenges they faced. The man in our story who became a follower of Jesus was an unlikely candidate on many levels. (Read Acts 8:9-13) First, he was a Samaritan, and this was taking place before the issue of outreach to Gentiles was resolved. Samaritans and Jews had a long history of enmity. While the Samaritans had some common beliefs and background with the Jews, they were considered racially inferior because they had intermarried with the people of the land. They were also considered religiously inferior because they had added religious beliefs and practices from the religions of their neighbors. So, when we hear that Simon was from Samaria, we immediately must think that something extraordinary has to happen to have him be included in the circle of Jesus' followers. The second barrier which the Holy Spirit helped Philip overcome in this baptism was the fact that Simon was a magician, a healer of some sort. In Deuteronomy 18:10-11, we hear about the Jewish prohibition against the practice of magic, "There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer." The third barrier was Simon's own belief that he could buy the gift of the Holy Spirit. He misunderstood that such power was a gift of pure grace and could only be given to those open to such grace and not those who are trying to use it for their own material benefit. The fourth barrier would have been Simon's livelihood being threatened by Philip and the other disciples who were able to bring healing to those in need, i.e.,

Simon's potential clients. If the Holy Spirit was not at work in Simon's heart, he would have seen the disciples as competitors who needed to be discredited. Yet, despite all these barriers, Simon was baptized and given instruction about faith. He was included in the circle of Christ's grace and the amazing thing is that he responded. That is the power of baptism and the coming of the Holy Spirit on someone's life.

So as we listen to the good news of this story, we are invited to trust that God's gift of the Spirit is beyond our control and beyond our limitations. God's grace is often seen as scandalous because it includes people we would rather keep out. It challenges our views of who is in and who is out. It even defies our neat understandings and definitions of our own worth and status. And because it is so different from our worldly views and assumptions, we need to be reminded over and over again that we are loved by God and baptism is that strong reminder. It is not magic. Instead, it is about something much more powerful. It is about God and God's power in our lives. If you have not been baptized, I invite you to consider the call to do so today. Come and pray with me after worship or call me this week.

Baptism is that reminder for each of us about this important rite of passage to accept and to claim that we are loved by God. It is like the scene in the Movie Toy Story when Buzz Lightyear finally accepts his identity as a toy that is to be loved by a boy and then transformation happens. He wanted to be a space ranger to fight evil, but that was not what he was made for. Toy Story is the story of toys coming to life and the rivalry between them when Woody was so jealous at first because Andy, the boy in the story, starts playing with the new high-tech toy, Buzz Lightyear. So Woody made Buzz feel bad about himself convincing him that he was just a toy, but in this scene we see a reversal for both of them. Finally Buzz realizes that being a toy loved by a boy was more important than any space mission. This is very similar to what it means to be a baptized child or adult to be nurtured in the church – to be taught the truth about who we are as people created to love and receive love. (Scene:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pmh8KHk8d2g>).

May we have the grace to always know that we belong to God. As Richard Rohr says in his book, *The Immortal Diamond*: "Life is not a matter of creating a special name for ourselves, but of uncovering the name we have always had. Our name has always been Beloved." Amen.