

*“Listen Up!” Confirmation Sermon*

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May 5, 2019     Mark 1:9-11 The Baptism of Jesus

How many of you have heard of Harry Potter? How many of you have read one or more of the Harry Potter books? Who has read all of them and seen all of the movies?

Harry Potter has a scar.

A lightning-shaped scar on his forehead. How did he get it? (Wait for answers from the congregation) Lord Voldemort, the most powerful and evil wizard, attempted to murder Harry when Harry was but fifteen months old. The scar was a result of this attack, so in one sense it is certainly a sign of evil.

But Harry did not die in the attack because...? His mother, Lily, protected him, at the cost of her own life. Harry's mother saved him, gave her life for his. So the scar is also a powerful symbol of love.

You and I are also marked with a powerful symbol of love.

Listen to Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Mark 1:9-11 (The Message) *At this time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life."*

This is Jesus' commissioning to ministry. God reminds him that he is chosen and *loved*. That is the foundation undergirding all of Jesus' ministry.

As a minister of the gospel, I remind you this day, as we baptize Anna and confirm these young people into membership and ministry that YOU are chosen and *loved*.

How many times, I wonder, how many times in his ministry, did Jesus think back to that day of his baptism? When Jesus was frustrated with disciples that were *so* slow to catch on, when he was faced with the blatant opposition of the religious leaders, when he was tempted to take shortcuts with his amazing powers, when he was simply bone weary, what joy and encouragement would he find in the memory of that baptismal day! “You are my beloved son.” Beloved.

I remind you this day, each of you: *You* are beloved. Even if you are not baptized. Did God love Jesus before Jesus’ baptism? Of course. Did God love you before your baptism? Of course. The baptism does not *cause* God to love us, it is simply the visible sign of the love that has been there forever.

Back to Harry Potter for a minute. The wonderful headmaster of Hogwart’s School, Albus Dumbledore, says to Harry in the very first book in the series, *“There is a room in the Department of Mysteries that is kept locked at all times. It contains a force that is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than the forces of nature. It is also, perhaps, the most mysterious of the many subjects for study that reside there. It is the power held within that room that you possess in such quantities and which Voldemort has not at all.”* (Harry Potter Wiki)

That power is...Love.

Dumbledore again to Harry: *Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark.* (*Ibid.*)

“In the end, Harry's love finally destroyed Lord Voldemort once and for all. Harry's love for his friends and loved ones caused him to sacrifice himself to Voldemort. This love was what made Harry different from the powerful Voldemort. (Harry) had something worth (struggling) for, while Voldemort could never understand the power of love. Harry's love for people even made him offer Voldemort a final chance of redemption.” (*Ibid.*)

Love.

Jesus put it this way: “Greater love has no one than this, to give one’s life for one’s friends.” Jesus did not only phrase it that way, but lived it that way. He walked the talk.

Love. It's what we're about in this fellowship of the followers of Jesus known as the Church, and in this little corner known as Oak Grove. Love. In everything we do. It's why we teach children about Jesus. It's why we visit the sick and the lonely. It's why we volunteer at VEAP and Loaves and Fishes and Homework Connection and Bridging and Cornerstone and why we deliver Meals on Wheels. It's why we work for justice in the world, including the right for every person to marry the person he or she loves. It's why we build a school for girls in Pakistan and paint hallways in affordable apartments in Richfield, provide housing and services for homeless youth in Bloomington, and go to the border to help desperate immigrants. It's why we share our money. Speaking of which, I gave you (the Confirmands) pledge cards on Tuesday. One of you left yours. So I will simply give each of you another one.

It's why we sing and read scripture and pray.

It's why we tell others about Jesus.

Love. We are marked by love and we are marked for love.

An acquaintance said to me once: "I don't have any idea what God is like."

That is the saddest thing. I do. You do. We have an idea what God is like. We look at Jesus to see what God is like: Jesus touching lepers, and healing them, along with the lame and the blind and the mute and the deaf and the *dead*, Jesus forgiving sinners, Jesus dandling the children on his knee, Jesus talking to women, Jesus commanding his followers to love their enemies, Jesus tearing down walls and building bridges. THAT is what God is like.

We look at the scarred body of the Resurrected Christ to see what God is like.

And more than that, when the Church is being faithful to Jesus, you can look at the church to see what God is like. When Frank Bliss takes muffins out to the protestors, we see what God is like.

Amen?

We love because God first loved us (I John). You are loved. By God and by Oak Grove.

I charge you: throughout your life journey with Jesus, be bearers of that love.

If I weren't running low on opportunities to be with you, I would stop right here. But I ask for a couple more minutes.

Because you are so immensely loved, this specifically is what I ask you to do in response:

Be grateful. Sometimes when I wake up in the morning, my heart is pounding with anxiety. (I have kids.) But most mornings, when I take time for my daily devotions—and skipping devotions because you are short of time is never a good idea—most mornings I write in my gratitude journal, which means coming up with 16 things for which I am grateful. By the time I am finished with that list, I am no longer fearful. I am thankful for the day ahead of me.

Second, in a world in which you can be anything, be kind.

Third, be angry. It's a God-given emotion. An emotion not to be used when some little inconvenience happens to you, but when you see the powerless being mistreated. Be angry.

On a regular basis, put your dang phone away and go out in nature. View a sunset, even a sunrise. Listen to the loons and the mourning doves and the cardinals and the Pileated woodpeckers. Smell the rain. Embrace the winter's cold on your face. Be still. Breathe in the gifts of God's amazing Creation: those gifts are health and wholeness and holiness.

Five. Don't worry about what people think of you. Within the 12-Step Community there is a great phrase, "Other people's opinion of me is none of my business." Don't worry what people are thinking about you. In fact, most of the time other people aren't thinking of you. They're just not. We're all thinking about ourselves.

What matters is what God thinks of you and what you think of you. God loves you. Love yourself.

Finally, align yourself with the winning side in life. Love wins.

Amen?

Amen!