

“Words of Life”

Mark 1:4-11

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Today, we join Christians around the world who are remembering the baptism of Jesus. All three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, tell us about it with varying details. Mark sets up the baptism by introducing his readers to John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet and forerunner of Jesus. Mark describes John as a simple, humble man that lived the life of a poor Bedouin.

Matthew tells us about John’s reluctance to baptize Jesus and Jesus’ insistence that he do so. Luke, on the other hand, never mentions John in conjunction with Jesus’ baptism. This is because Luke has John in prison by the time he writes about Jesus’ baptism.

What all three accounts have in common, however, is the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism and the words of a proud Father, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” Mark 1:11.

It is these affirming words shared by all three of the gospel writers that captured my attention as I was preparing this message. As I mulled them over, a simple message dawned on me. **There are words we need to hear for our own well-being and there are words we need to speak to help others along their journey.** Those words are contained in this baptismal blessing.

Are you familiar with the biblical concept of blessing? It is an important part of our faith and nowhere is this seen any better than our text.

A blessing is a way of affirming another person and giving them the gift of unconditional love. It is not the same as a compliment and certainly not flattery. It cannot be earned because it is not dependent upon a person’s behavior or achievements. It is a gift from a loving heart to a grateful one.

Look at the blessing God bestowed upon Jesus at his baptism. There are no strings, contingencies or asterisks attached to it. God does not say to Jesus, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am pleased because...or as long as...or if...” There are no conditions or stipulations.

God loved Jesus on that day just as He had always loved him, unconditionally. He did not have to earn God’s love or work to maintain it. It was not dependent upon what he did or did not do. God always loved Jesus and always would and was eager to express it.

Why did Jesus need to know this and hear these words? It was a time of change and challenge in his life. He was leaving the security of home and heading in a new direction. For the last time, he cleaned up the carpentry shop, put away the tools and closed the door on all that was familiar to him. I’m sure it was an exciting time, but also a frightening one.

What did he need as he made this transition? He needed a blessing that would instill courage and confidence in him, give him a clear sense of identity and strengthen his self-esteem, increase his faith and prepare him for the challenges ahead and reassure him that he was not alone on this journey of faith. God knew what Jesus needed and like

a loving parent, He provided it through that blessing of affirmation and unconditional love.

Has anyone ever done this for you, given you a blessing at a critical time in your life? If they have, I am sure you still remember it and deeply appreciate the one that gave you this gift.

What impact did their words have on you? Did they inspire and encourage you? Did they instill courage and confidence in you? Did they build up your self-esteem and give you a sense of belonging? Did they empower you to proceed with your divine mission?

Who needs a blessing from you? Is it a family member, perhaps a child, grandchild or even a parent? Could it be a friend, a schoolmate, coworker or fellow church member?

Is it someone going through a transition or facing a stiff challenge? Is it someone reeling from a mistake who is trying to put the broken pieces of their life back together? Is it someone suffering a loss, feeling inadequate and alone? Is it someone wrestling with life's toughest questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What am I worth?

I strongly encourage you to be the voice of God in their life and give them the gift of affirmation and unconditional love. The benefits for them and you will be immeasurable.

Why do you think Jesus was able to hear these words from God at his baptism? I believe it was because he had heard them many times from the people around him. I am confident he heard them frequently from Mary and Joseph, and grew up in this kind of loving, affirming environment, and because of it, he was able to hear and respond to God's affirming words.

It is hard to hear from God what you never hear from others. This is why it is so important that you follow God's lead and affirm and bless those you love.

Many of you recall the name of Dr. Myron Madden. For twenty-seven years, he wrote an article titled, "Questions and Answers" in "Home Life," a Baptist publication. By training, he is a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, retired from the Louisiana State Medical Center.

In his book, Blessing: Giving the Gift of Power, he writes about the benefits of blessing. "All of us have a strong need for the blessing and approval of others. We want to be made to feel accepted, worthy, OK. Many of us bring from our early years in life the assumption that we can't really be loved and accepted as we are. This alone can set us on the path of doing, achieving, striving and accomplishing in order to win the acceptance we need. When we must work for our love, or rather, when we assume that we must work to get it, then we can never really have it.

If I assume that you will accept me only after I make certain changes, then I do not understand acceptance. Genuine acceptance is given to a person, not to a person's changes. It is given upon one's *being* rather than one's *doing*.

Too many of us are launched into adult life with a vow of determination to 'get out there and get it.' We feel our acceptance will be guaranteed when we make our first million, get that degree, have our first child, earn the big promotion, win the sweepstakes or publish a novel. The belief behind the drive for success and power is one that tells us we will be OK after one of these great events transpires. But the steps up the ladder are only external; they seldom change the way we see ourselves. If a thousand voices out

there lend praise to our successes, they cannot drown out some parental voice from our past that puts us down.

We parents make many mistakes in planting a judgmental voice in our children. Our intentions are good because we want to make sure that they don't err too much when they become responsible for themselves. If the negative 'nag' is deposited in their spirits, they still feel responsible to us.

Hopefully our own mistakes here can be corrected by the Good News that God's voice is always a positive one of encouragement and hope. It is given to take away all the voices of put-down and blame. As Paul wrote, 'If God be for us, who can be against us?' Romans 8:32.

It is the voice of true blessedness, one that gives an acceptance based not on our fitful and cyclical behavior but on the steady, never-changing love of God as it has been shown in Jesus the Christ. This is the gift of the Gospel to complete our separation from our parents and to give our children what it takes to separate from us. Hopefully, they have our blessing in spite of our many failures as parents.

Perhaps blessing is better understood if we contrast it with money. We pay for work done after the task is completed. We bless before the work begins in a loving relationship such as a family. When we use approval as a way of paying, we mix up money and love as if they were the same commodity. Let me stress the difference. Money is for meeting obligations; blessing is a gift. With money we settle or finish matters. Heaven is not a blessing offered us for being good. 'It is the Father's pleasure to give you the kingdom' Luke 12:32. As long as I work for a blessing, I may be overlooking what may be had for the asking."

Like many of you, I read about the historic meeting that took place at the White House last Wednesday. Three of our former Presidents had lunch with President George W. Bush and President-Elect Barack Obama. It was in the Oval Office during the photo shoot that President Bush spoke these words to President-Elect Obama.

"One message I have and I think we all share is that we want you to succeed. Whether we are Democrat or Republican, we care deeply about this country. All of us who have served in this office understand that the office itself transcends the individual. We wish you the very best and so does the country."

This, my friends, was a blessing.