

“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

This heavenly declaration is affirmation for Jesus and clarification for the crowds. It is affirming for Jesus as he starts his public ministry. In years past his mother and father had told him about his special birth and how he was uniquely anointed by God. Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Zechariah confirmed that they too had an angelic announcement about their son John when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, visited to them. Cousin John, baptizing the multitudes at the river Jordan, indicates that one greater than him will appear. The heavenly declaration indicates that the “greater one” is Jesus. That is affirmation for Jesus and clarification for the crowds.

“With you I am well pleased.” What is God saying here? I think it is multi-faceted. First, God is seemingly pleased with the preparation Jesus had engaged in throughout his developmental years. We have scant information on what his preparation might have entailed. The only thing that the gospels reveal is that Jesus was well acquainted with the Law of Moses, the writing of prophets, and the faith of his ancestors. We know this from the gospel passage about Jesus when he was 12 years of age when he visits the teachers in the Temple and demonstrates his knowledge and understanding. In addition, various countries have claimed that Jesus spent years not covered in Bible in their region, learning from their sacred traditions. I have experienced this in my travels to India. I have had several people asked me if I was familiar with the legend of Jesus visiting India in his teens and twenties to study Veda, the most ancient Hindu scriptures, with Brahmin priests and then spending time in the the Himalayas in Tibetan monasteries studying Buddhism before then traveling back through Persia to Jerusalem at the age of 29. It is interesting to ponder such possibilities and to think of the common threads between rich religious traditions but we have no historical verification of such legends.

“With you I am well pleased.” God is seemingly pleased with the preparation Jesus has done for the moment at hand. I believe this is true for all of us as well. God loves to be pleased with you and me. God delights in catching us doing right things. “With you I am well please!” God says to us. In Ken Blanchard’s classic book, “The One Minute Manager,” he instructs bosses to clearly explain expectations of the job with employees and then heap praise on employees when they catch them doing their jobs well.

God gave us clear expectations for being children of God with Ten Commandments.

- You shall have no other Gods but me
- You shall not make for yourself any idol
- You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God
- *You shall remember and keep the Sabbath day holy*
- Respect your father and mother
- You must not commit murder
- You must not commit adultery
- You must not steal
- You must not give false evidence against your neighbor
- You must not be envious of your neighbor’s possessions

Look at #4, God is well please with all of us in worship this weekend as this is certainly one way of remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy. God is looking at you with a smile on the God’s face and saying “With you, I am well pleased.”

Jesus was even more succinct regarding divine expectations for us as children of God. He said “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength and love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Jesus said these two guidelines capture the essence of the Ten Commandments and the whole Law of Moses.

One of the ways we love our neighbor as ourselves is when we give a portion of what we have to be used for the good of the greater whole. God is well pleased with us as a congregation again this year because we gave our proper portion for the greater whole as we paid our full Mission Shares of \$55,601 to the Great Plains Conference in 2018. Our Mission Shares combined with the Mission Shares of the nearly 1,000 United Methodist congregations in the Great Plains enables many ministries to express love in tangible ways to our hurting world. God is looking at us with a smile on the God’s face and saying “With you, I am well pleased.”

Now back to our gospel text, “With you I am well pleased.” First, God is pleased with preparation Jesus had engaged in throughout his developmental years. Second, I believe God is well pleased with the future commitments Jesus is claiming at his baptism. In retrospect we see that Jesus had the commitment to teach, heal, sacrifice, and even die for the sake of humanity.

Our commitments can also bring a smile to God’s face when we make them. Look at the commitments of those who came out to listen to John and be baptized at the Jordan. Luke tells us that their commitments included having a heart of repentance for past wrongs. This not only pleases God but finds God forgiving them for their sins. Luke goes on to detail the commitment John was requesting of the people that choose to be baptized.

- prepare the way of the Lord
- if one has two coats then share one with another who has none
- if one has food then share some with one who is hunger
- those with power should not abuse those without power

As those baptized by John embraced these commitments we know God is looked at them with a smile on the God’s face and said “With you, I am well pleased.”

As we fast forward to 2019 please think of the commitments that you embraced that find God proclaiming “With you, I am well pleased?” Think of all the loving, caring, and giving commitments you have maintained over the years, God celebrates them. With you, God is well pleased.

Beyond long standing commitments your pastoral team here at St. Paul invites you to consider a new commitment within our congregational life. Please consider one of these three choices in the next eight weeks of the Epiphany season.

-We are invite you to join our “Green group” conversation for the next eight weeks as we consider ways we can be good to the environment in our homes, places of business and in the activities here at church. If our Green group is a commitment that calls to your heart let us know.

Another option...

-We invite you to join an exploration about becoming a Reconciling Congregation where we intentional seek to include persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities in both our policy and practices here at St. Paul. We will explore this possible commitment with persons from churches that are Reconciling Congregations (St. Luke and Hanscom Park UMC of Omaha, St. Paul UMC in Lincoln). We will have these exploratory conversations on four consecutive Wednesday evenings at 6 p.m. in our chapel starting January 30<sup>th</sup>. We invite you to commit yourself to this exploration.

Another option...

-We invite you to join members from the other fifty United Methodist churches in our Missouri River District to learn about Fresh Expressions. Fresh Expressions is about reaching people who might never think of stepping inside a church but are open to God’s love as they connect with us in activities beyond

church walls. Fresh Expressions is a movement that is cultivating new forms of church alongside existing congregations in order to reach a changing world. Begun in England 10 years ago, it has resulted in the birth of over 2,500 new communities in the UK alone. Fresh Expressions has spread to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and is also taking shape in the US. At its heart, Fresh Expressions is about empowering and equipping us as God's people to develop creative expressions of church that can reach the increasing diversity of our society. If Fresh Expressions is a commitment that calls to your heart let us know.

Jerry, Marta and I invite you to consider one or more of these options in January and February;

- Green group conversation/brainstorming
- Reconciling Congregation exploration
- Fresh Expression outreach

Let us know of your commitment and we will share the details with you.

I believe God is well pleased when we are bold enough to embrace a new commitment that is other centered, filled with possibilities, and demands we hold onto our faith because of the uncertainties. Isn't that what we see in Jesus on the day of his baptism? He is making a commitment to start a new venture that fully committed to others but is filled with uncertainties.

Upon seeing Jesus' new commitment God could not contain God's self and heaven opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus and a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

As we embrace new commitments for others in 2019 please know that God is looking at us with a smile on the God's face and saying "With you, I am well pleased."

What might your commitment be?