

Labels
Matthew 3:13-17
January 15, 2023
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Recently I went through our pantry. I pulled out all the food and threw out the expired food and put like things together. Then I put items in clear bins. Next I labeled the bins like cooking supplies. Sometimes we put labels on people or people put labels on us.

The labels we get as children are not always helpful. A few of my labels were painful to receive. Here are a couple.

I took ballet for 5 years until one day my teacher said, "Paulette, you know you will never be graceful; so you should quit ballet." So Label received of being "ungraceful."

Do you carry around labels that you've gained over the years? We can give those labels a lot of power. Sometimes those labels challenge us to "earn" other labels- ones we like. We try to achieve, to find something we are good at. The power of labels can make us feel unworthy, paralyzed and limited.

In our Gospel lesson today we watch as Jesus is baptized. His baptism is in all 4 gospels which tells us it is very important. Baptism was a sign of a commitment to one's restoration of relationship with God. Jesus, of course, had a great relationship with God, but he came for the restoration of all of us. He wanted to restore humans to right relationship with God.

As Jesus came up from the water, the heavens opened, and God's spirit descended like a dove and landed on him. A voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Jennifer Vija Pietz, professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, points out that "God declares his unconditional love for Jesus, before Jesus proves to be faithful in his testing in the wilderness," (before he begins to heal people) and "before he fulfills his messianic mission." "Being God's beloved Son fundamentally defines Jesus. Jesus does not do God's work in order to earn God's love, instead, God's love motivates and sustains Jesus' ministry of love to those who are hurting and those who will hurt him, culminating in his death on the cross."

Jesus did not do anything to earn the label of God's beloved. As Christians and children of God, we are invited to call God Abba Father Daddy. We are claimed and loved. We are beloved. You are beloved.

We can replace and override all other labels with the label that comes from above, "You are my child, Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased."

It is this identity that fuels and sustains us in life, in loving others, in all we do and say, and in our lives and ministry together as the church.

We are Beloved.

You are Beloved.

We can be at peace, knowing and resting in God's great love for us.

We can be brave and love others, out of the depth of God's rich fountain of love.

The Gaithers sang years ago, "I am loved. I can risk loving you, because the one who knows me best loves me most."

You are loved.

Beloved, let that be the label we live into.

Beloved, may that label nourish our self-worth and calling to reach out to others in love. Amen.