

Generation to Generation: I Believe in You  
January 15, 2023 Montavilla United Methodist  
Rev. Heather Riggs

### **Matthew 3:13-17 UNRSV**

**13** Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. **14** John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" **15** But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. **16** And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. **17** And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

### **Generation to Generation**

This stole is a part of the Bishop Cal McConnel collection. He and Velma gave me his stoles when he was done with them. I had the privilege of Bishop Cal attending my church when I was a brand new Pastor in my first appointment and he is one of those people who just embodies a Spiritual presence. Every time I was with him I could see God shining out of him.

Every Sunday I would be standing outside the sanctuary, greeting people as they came in and when Cal would come in he would take my hand between both of his, look me full in the eyes and say to me, "I'm so glad you're my Pastor. The future of the church is in good hands with Pastors like you."

The thing is, he would say this to me, when I hadn't done anything yet.

I hadn't preached yet.

I hadn't led worship yet.

I hadn't done anything to show him if I was any good or not yet.

All I did was show up and here he was. The legendary Bishop Cal, telling me that he believed in me.

It took me a while to figure out that this was Grace in action.

Grace, by definition is unmerited favor - or unearned acceptance.

As a Pastor, I feel kind of silly that it took me a while to figure this out, until I realized just how rare Grace is in our culture.

You see, I was raised, like so many of us, by parents who were stingy with praise and generous with criticism.

For example, when I was in the 8th grade I earned all A's, even in my dreaded math class. I proudly carried my perfect report card home and showed my Dad my hard won 4.0 and his response was, "That's very good, but next time let's get that A- in math up to an A."

It's like he was afraid that if he gave me full approval, without any criticism that I would be unmotivated to improve.

And he wasn't the only one. I see this everywhere in our culture from parenting to workplace supervision, to school, to performance arts. As a musician, I eventually learned that the more criticism I received during an audition, the more likely I was to get the part!

It's like our whole culture believes that criticism is motivational!

Which is ridiculous, because criticism is actually demotivating!

We've all experienced demotivational leadership, right?

Where we tried to do something and did pretty good, but the person in charge: parent, Pastor, teacher, boss; criticized every little flaw. Or even worse, they gave us the "poop" sandwich - where they sandwich the criticism between praise? They open with a lame complement, then tell you everything you did wrong and then close with an even lamer compliment? Nobody wants that sandwich!

And we've all done this to others! Not because we're bad people, but because this is sooooo common in our culture. It's what we've been taught, and we don't really know how to help motivate people to improve, so we end up demotivating them instead.

The thing is, Grace is far more motivating than criticism and God knows this.

What stands out for me in the story of Jesus' baptism is that here Jesus is, at the very beginning of his public ministry when he hasn't done anything yet and the voice from heaven is shouting:

"That's my son! He's so awesome!"

...as if God is a football dad and Jesus had just won the championship.

*But Jesus hadn't done anything yet!*

*All Jesus did was show up!*

When I was developing the ideas for this sermon series, I was mostly focused on trying to help the most of you who are older, understand younger generations. My original theme for this sermon was: wouldn't it be beautiful if we who are in the 3 older generations could give that kind of Baptismal Grace to the younger people in our churches. To just love them for showing up and encourage them into growth instead of trying to criticize them into growth.

But during our discussion groups what I heard from those of you who are Boomers and Traditionalists is that you are also longing for Grace. That you are deeply tired from trying to hold the institutional church together and demotivated by the fact that there doesn't seem to be anybody behind you to pick up the work of maintaining the institution. Many of you are also lonely and longing for meaningful connection and instead of finding connection at church, what you find is work.

Haydn Shaw, in his book, *Generational IQ* writes, "Traditionalists (and Boomers) get almost another adult lifetime in retirement compared to earlier generations." A whole other lifetime for people whose primary identity was their career, during which their family may live far away, they may struggle with finding purpose, and we may suffer the loss of important friendships as people move away or die.

The Epiphany for me, is that after years of feeling frustrated with how our mainline churches have such good theology and such poor hospitality for younger generations, is that y'all probably don't feel very supported by your churches either.

I think we're all longing for someone to just be happy that we showed up.

Traditionalists, Millennials, Gen Z, Boomers and Gen X - we all long for a community where we \*feel\* beloved, but our culture of criticism has told us that we are not worthy of love unless we are excellent.

Friends, hear me: "We are not worthy of love unless we are excellent" is the exact opposite of the Gospel!

Think about this!

Bishop Cal was embodying the gospel when he said, “the church is in good hands with you!” when I hadn’t done anything yet!

This is exactly how God loves us!!!!

With every breath that we take, God is saying to us,

**You are God’s beloved child in whom God is well pleased.**

You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased.

You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased.

You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased.

Turn to your neighbor and say that to one another:

You are God’s beloved child in whom God is well pleased.

That feels good doesn’t it.

Grace is what we’re all looking for. All generations need grace.

So what if...

What if the next time we see that person of another generation that we maybe struggle to understand, we opened the conversation like Bishop Cal?

What if we said: “I’m so glad you’re my child.”

Or “I’m so glad you’re my grandmother.”

Or “I’m so glad you’re my friend.”

And what if...

What if, as a church, we stop trying to hold the institution together!

Stop trying to check all the boxes, and do all the things that nobody really wants to do anymore, and instead ask the question:

**How do we help one another experience Grace?**

How do we help one another experience Grace?

Because that's why we go to church, right?

To experience grace ourselves and to share grace with others, right?

Church, we're in a liminal time. A time between the mid-twentieth-century ways of being and what is coming next.

In liminal times it's actually healthy for old systems to break down.

It's actually healthy for us to not quite know what we're doing!

Because trying to hold the old, broken, systems together is an exhausting recipe for decline and institutional death.

So let's let the institution break!

Let's focus on what really matters:

The Grace of God's love for us and God's command that we share that Grace of love with one another.

Let's make church a place where we ALL feel loved and believed in.

Let's explore together the question:

How do we help one another experience Grace?