

BAPTISM AFFIRMED – PLEASING LOVE ABOUNDS

ISAIAH 43:1-7 // TITUS 3:4-8 // LUKE 3:15-17, 21-22

Grace and Peace in this New Year to you from Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We come together for this First Sunday After Epiphany feeling true joy and blessings as we celebrate the young men and young women who, today, will be affirming their baptism through the confirmation of their faith in Jesus Christ. Our students engaged in classes and a retreat at Mount Cross as we journeyed together in confirmation throughout the Fall season.

Today we celebrate with them, reflecting on Jesus' own baptism as we encourage and affirm their spiritual growth as disciples and as they express a renewed resolve to follow Christ as their Lord in their lives as they go forward. We can also use today's reflections in His Word to explore our own faith journey, our own spiritual growth, our own obedience to His calling and reaffirm our commitment to follow Him.

What I love most about Luke's insights into the baptism at the Jordan River is that we are drawn into a scene where Jesus approaches John and those at the water with a heart and attitude of humility, peace, and submission. Jesus is revealed in this moment to be fully human as he enters into the river, and as He is baptized by John alongside the others, we see Him to be fully divine, as He is recognized by the Father in Heaven as God's Son.

Luke bears witness to the full Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – making their presence known along the banks of the Jordan. We see in this passage how God exists in three persons – one substance, co-eternal, and coequal. We see an intricate relationship where pleasing love abounds as the scene unfolds to all those being baptized in the River that day.

The past few weeks we have witnessed the stories of Jesus being born to humble parents, given a human nature, and glorified in the presence of shepherds and travelers from abroad. We now realize in His baptism that He identifies and understands the new birth that awaits a sinful people once the Holy Spirit indwells their hearts and minds. As He prayerfully seeks God's affirmation of His calling, we see the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descend upon Him. As the His Father declares *"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."* These simple words begin His ministry calling and His journey to the cross at Calvary.

When we look at our own lives – the challenges, the battles, the brokenness, the hurtfulness – that sometimes comes our way, we can always look to Jesus at the River and know that He understands and relates to our humanity. He is fully man and yet, at the same time, fully God. He goes into the River and later gets hung from the Cross as only a man could. He lives a sinless life and rises from the dead as only Our Lord and Savior, fully God, could.

Jesus, in his manhood, approached the banks of the Jordan to affirm His calling before all of those confessing and repenting of their sins. In the same way, our students today affirm their baptism by confirming their faith among the community of faith here at St. Tim's – we are a family of sinners in need of repentance, in need of a Savior.

One student shared in their confirmation essay: "Confirmation is one way to confirm my faith in front of people I love and who love me. I am showing that I am confident enough in my relationship with God that I want to show this to the people who mean the most to me."

Another student shares, "So why now? Why do something so important during Middle school? When a Christian family has a child, they baptize the baby. At that time, the baby can't really say or do anything, so the parent speaks on behalf of the child. As a teenager, I can now speak for myself and my own faith. I believe confirmation to be about my belief in God, my trust in God, and my trust in God's promises."

Another student views confirmation as "a word with many different definitions. It shows proof of something or verifies it. It demonstrates the authentication or ratification of our actions. Confirmation means that I am verifying my belief in God... it means I am saying yes to the fact that I am a disciple of Jesus and that I am following His ways and His teachings." What powerful words directly from our students! Parents, family members, friends, and all of us here at St. Tim's, we can be confident of this – our students are definitely His disciples!

For many of us, we tend to view confirmation as a culmination or a graduation closing out one season of our lives. A concluding chapter as we move on to the next chapter God has planned for us. I would like to propose that we, instead, view confirmation as an inspiration and an aspiration to become followers of Jesus. That you see this not as crossing the finish line, but rather as putting our feet in the starting blocks of the race God has called us to run.

Our students, and each one of us when we confirm our faith, are beginning a lifelong journey to be taken stride by stride as God lays out the path ahead for us as good and faithful servants. We respond to the Holy Spirit's prompting to Christ's call for our obedience to God's Word and God's Will. Our response results from following the love we receive from Him. Our response is returned out of the love we recognize for Him. In our response, He calls us to engage others reflecting the love we gain through Him.

In every way possible, we become His followers, He becomes Our Lord. We are called to a Great Commitment which to me equals a life of walking in light of the Greatest Commandment (Matthew 22:37-39), the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), and what I like to refer to as the Great Compassion (Luke 4:16-21). The Greatest Commandment tells us³⁷ **"love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."**³⁸ **This is the first and greatest commandment.**³⁹ **And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" We are committed to loving our neighbors as we ourselves have been loved by God.**

The Great Commission (in Matthew 28) reminds us all authority belongs to Him, ¹⁹ **Therefore [we are called to] go and make disciples..., baptizing..., ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.** While we are going, Christ commands us to draw out from others the desire to keep, observe, and obey everything He has instructed, modeled, and passed along to us as we are empowered by His Spirit. This is our commission and defining purpose in life.

And additionally the Great Compassion (in Luke 4), revealed to us following Jesus' baptism and wilderness season of temptation after He entered the temple in Nazareth. ¹⁶ He had gone into the synagogue, and read the scroll of the prophet Isaiah: ¹⁸ **"The Spirit of the Lord is on me... to preach good news to the poor... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners... recover sight for the blind... and release the oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim... the Lord's favor."** He said to them, **"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."**

We are called by Christ to act with sincere commitment to Know the Father, Grow as His Disciples, and Go With the Spirit. He modeled and passed along to us just how to do so. Love, make disciples, baptize, train up, share the good news, proclaim freedom, pray in His name for healing, and guide others to share in the same freedom that comes with faith in Christ. But how are we to accomplish this?

One student in their essay recounted an example using a mobile phone that I have shared in earlier messages, "The Holy Spirit is inside each of us from the moment we are baptized. But in order to keep that connection with God, we have to recharge the place the Holy Spirit dwells inside of us. Without the Holy Spirit we would not have a relationship with God, and Jesus dying on the cross and ascending into heaven is how the Holy Spirit is able to dwell in our hearts. Through Jesus, the Holy Spirit is in us. Without Jesus and His Spirit, there would be no way to relate to God. Each part of the Trinity plays a role in our relationship with God. The Trinity works much like a phone charger for a phone. The phone's battery represents the Holy Spirit which has to be charged frequently using Jesus, the charging cord, which is connect to the power source of God the father."

So how do we effectively recharge? In their essays, all of the students talk about growing their faith by being in fellowship with other Christians – in worship, volunteering at VBS, participating in Sunday Café and Cornerstone; by connecting daily with the Lord through meditating on His Word and communing with Him in prayer. One student feeling challenged stated, "the pastors are sometimes saying that you need to be so dedicated that you are willing to give up everything for God and let the Holy Spirit guide you. I will put fewer things in front of God and give Him more control." Yes, even students listen to what we say – sometimes! 😊

In today's reading in Titus Chapter 3, we are reminded: ⁴ ...when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. ⁸ This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone. (Titus 3:4–8 NIV84)

By God's grace, each of us has been given rebirth and renewal poured out from the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ. Each day we can die to ourselves and live out our lives in the kindness and love granted by God. This transformation should inspire us to good deeds as we more fully understand that our baptism and confirmation of faith, reassures us we are children of God's. The words spoken over Jesus: *"You are my Child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased"* are spoken over each of our students today and over each of us who have been baptized and confirmed our faith in the Lord.

Through His grace, each one of us is connected to the body of Christ, embraced as family members within the Christian community, and granted new life through His resurrection. Jesus did not take long following His Spirit-filled baptism to move into His Spirit-driven mission. His mission focused on bringing an abundant life, anchored on God's Word, to the people God put in His path. Jesus modeled for us what it means to bless those around Him. When it comes to living an abundant life, Jesus showed us it is better to give than to receive, it is better to serve than be served.

My challenge to the rest of us is to model for our students what Christ modeled for us. We can spur on our students in their journey to grow as His disciples and mature in their faith among the fellowship of believers.

Confirmation marks a renewed opportunity for our students' to journey out to minister to others, share the good news and to serve others in His name. They are being called to a bold new mission. As they do so, I'd like to remind them – keep the faith, keep the focus, and keep pursuing His promises for your lives. God's pleasing love will abound in this life and in the life to come.

Let us pray...