

This year we will be walking through the Gospel of Luke, and Luke like the other 3 gospels has his own unique message, and I've summarized that message as the Big Table. In Luke, Jesus describes God's dream for the world as a giant celebratory dinner party in which we are all invited, including and especially those we might think have been left off the guest list. Jesus is continually extending invites those we'd least expect, and eventually that gets him into trouble with those who want to keep us divided, namely those in power who benefit from the status quo. But Jesus is so committed to this dream of God's Big Table that he will die for it, and even that won't stop him. But it all starts with baptism.

Several years ago, I had a dream several I've never forgotten. I was a contestant on Gordon Ramsay's reality show MasterChef, which if you've seen it is a contest for amateur cooks. Now in my dream I knew I was a pastor, and I didn't stand a chance against these people. But the first challenge was to cut as many carrots as we could, and suddenly I realize that if I go slow, I might make it through the first round. So I cut my carrots, slowly but surely, and the time comes to be judged. I walked up the platform where Gordon Ramsey was waiting for me, and I knelt before him like a soldier about to be knighted. And as I waited to hear him speak, I leaned the side of my forehead into his kneecap, hoping, just hoping that maybe he will say those words I longed to hear. The seconds ticked by, and he said nothing, so finally I looked up at his face, and just as he was about to speak... I woke up.

Deep within my heart, there's this fear that I don't measure up, that when I am judged, I'll be found unworthy. And I don't think I'm alone in this fear. All around us, every day we are bombarded with messages of how we don't measure up, how we are not good enough, but you can be if you join this gym, drink this mushroom coffee, go on this diet, take this yoga class, use these essential oils, fit into those jeans, and only then will you be worthy. The message is this—you're not worthy, but you could be if you do X. And we often come to religion, hoping to find some relief, but sadly we often find more of the same. You're not worthy, you sinner, but you can be if only you pray more, read the Bible more, serve more, get baptized, speak in tongues—the list goes on and on, and it's all one big scam, a never-ending tread mill that only stops when we die.

How do we get off the tread mill? How can we find the assurance that we are enough? Today is the Baptism of Our Lord Sunday. Every year on the first Sunday after Epiphany, we go back to the water with Jesus. It's the beginning of the church year, and the beginning of Jesus' ministry. We heard over Advent some of the prophecies about Jesus, that by the tender mercies of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us. Now, nearly 30 years have passed, and it's time for the tender mercies to break.

Luke says the people are full of expectation, wondering who this John the Baptist might be. Could he be the one we've all been waiting for? John says I am not. I baptize you with water, but the one who is coming will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John raises the people's already high expectations, baptizing people as a sign and seal that they belonged to this new movement of God, one that the Herod's of this world cannot control. John's was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus to our great surprise decides to get baptized as well. Why would Jesus be baptized? It's not like he needs to repent, right? Yet, here is Jesus, just like everyone else, entering the waters of baptism.

In the first centuries of the early Church, there were all kinds of debates among well-meaning Christians who disagreed about really important things—hard to imagine, I know.

One of those disagreements was about the humanity of Jesus. Was Jesus fully human, or only partially human? In particular, there was a big fight over whether or not Jesus' rational mind was fully human or was his mind divine? The church came to decide with Gregory of Nazianzus that Jesus did have a fully human mind, and the reason that Gregory gave was this, "Whatever is not assumed is not healed." If Jesus did not assume a fully human mind, then he cannot heal our sinful minds because whatever is not assumed, is not healed. And this same dynamic is at work in Jesus' baptism.

The reason Jesus was baptized is because he came to heal us, and the way he heals us is by fully assuming our human life, by entering into our sinful and broken condition, by taking our humanity close to himself; thereby bringing it to the heart of God where it can be healed. One of my favorite verses in the New Testament is from the book of Hebrews which says that God in Jesus became human and tasted suffering and death for everyone. Hebrews says Jesus is God's son, and we are all God's children. Therefore, Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. Did you know that Jesus is never ashamed of you? He never looks at you and says, "You make me sick. You're such a disappointment." No, he's proud to be one with you, to call you his sibling. Jesus humbly accepts John's baptism as a sign and seal that he is one with us in our need for repentance and forgiveness. He's with us, one of us, and thus reveals that we are one with God.

Having been baptized, Luke tells us that Jesus prays, and the heavens are opened, a dove descends and a voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This for me is the most powerful story in all of scripture—a momentary glimpse of Trinitarian glory with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all present, and God speaking the words that we all long to hear— "You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased." These are the words I longed to hear in that silly dream with Gordon Ramsay. These are the words we all long to hear but don't know how to find. So, we spend our lives trying to earn and deserve them, hoping someone or something can tell us we are OK. Companies make billions off us every year, promising that which they can never deliver. We are bombarded with messages saying we are not enough, but Jesus hears what we all long to know, that we are beloved, and God is pleased with us.

The entire Christian life is about coming to believe that what God said about Jesus in his baptism, God also says about each one of us. That's what baptism is meant to reveal—we too are God's beloved, and there's nothing we can do about it. This is the primal truth: you belong to God, and God cherishes you—not because of something you've done or because of something you believe, it's not because you're a Christian, or because of your virtue, it's simply because you exist—plain and simple. That's a good enough reason for God to love you. And I can tell you that until I'm blue in the face, but you need to hear it for yourself. So, listen, and dare to believe this good news. Whatever is not assumed is not healed, and God in Christ has assumed the whole of human experience, making God and humanity one. You are God's beloved, and that is not up for discussion or negotiation. It's settled and can't be undone.

Jesus hears and believes this truth. Everything he does is based upon his certainty that he is God's beloved, and we are all children of God. If that's true, then everyone belongs at God's table. The forces of exclusion, be they religious or economic, political or moral, Jesus subverts them all and invite us to live into our birthright as God's beloved and take our

seat at God's table. Everything and everyone belongs, which means only exclusion is excluded. Here's the good news that God tells us right up front—you belong already. You always have. So, get off the treadmill. Stop trying to earn that which is already yours and take your seat at God's table. You belong here.