

Jesus' baptism, Mr. Rogers, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the struggle for racial equality, and my email signature—all of these are all interconnected. But let's start with my email signature. Someone asked me this week why I sign all my emails, "One Struggle to Love." Have any of you wondered that before? It's a good question, and it grows out of the story you just heard, the baptism of Jesus. This is my single favorite story in all of scripture. You might even say that I am obsessed with it. It is for me *the story*, because it expresses our core struggle as human beings. Above all else, humans need to know that they are loved. It's our deepest hunger to know that we are good and are worthy of love and belonging. Love is no small thing. It is no weak thing. It is *the thing*, and from the very beginning, God has been telling us how loved we are, if only we have ears to hear.

Last week, we celebrated the Epiphany, when the magi come and kneel before the Christ child. Between now and Lent is the season of Epiphany, in which the good news of Christ is revealed to the world. Every year, the first Sunday after the Epiphany is Baptism of the Lord Sunday, where we return to the Jordan River and witness the truth of Jesus' identity made manifest. That's what an epiphany is, a moment of revealing, in which a previously hidden truth is laid bare. Notice that **an epiphany doesn't create the truth. It reveals an already existing truth**, and that's exactly what we see in Jesus' baptism.

Jesus approaches his cousin John, seeking to be baptized. John has been leading a renewal movement, bringing people back to Israel's birthplace. Israel is born after God had freed them from slavery in Egypt. After 40 years in the wilderness, Joshua brings the people to the Jordan River, where they cross over into the promised land. The waters of the Jordan are the womb from which Israel emerges. Israel is born in the hope of being a light to all nations. They are to live as God's beloved people, which is what the covenant between God and Israel was all about. God would be Israel's God, and Israel would be the people of God, the two would live in a relationship of covenant love that the world would see and rejoice. That was the plan, but if you know the story, things didn't work out as planned. Instead of living as a liberated people, Israel became more like Egypt, seeking power, not love, and the relationship between God and Israel was strained to the point of breaking. By the time of Christ, Israel is being ruled by yet another foreign Empire. John the Baptist steps into the story and says, let's run it back. Let's go back to where it all started, only this time, we'll do things right! This time, things will be different, because this time we will be a people of repentance.

John's message is about repentance and change, **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,"** he proclaims. And people come out to hear him in droves, wanting to start fresh, hoping that somehow this time it will be different. This sounds so familiar to me, especially this time of year. It seems like every ad I see on social media right now promises a transformed life in just 30 days, if only I...fill in the blank: buy this nutritional shake, try this new exercise equipment, use this meditation app that will change everything. The list is infinite, but the pitch is always the same. We are suckers for messages that promise a changed life if only we do this. For John, the message was confess your sins and be baptized, because God is coming, and you better shape up. The hunger for a new life runs deep, and the cost of this new life is always about trying harder, pushing further, doing more than other people are willing to do. That's how you win in life, we are told, and John raises the expectations that someone is coming after him who will go even further than he does.

Jesus steps into these expectations, and he says to his cousin, can I be baptized too? Apparently, that's not what John had in mind. John thought Jesus had come to whip the troops into shape, not take his place alongside them. He says, "I should be baptized by you, yet you come to me?" Contrary to John's expectations, Jesus doesn't just come to scold and give orders. He comes to hear words of love spoken over him in baptism. It turns out he needs the same thing we do, to know that he is loved exactly as he is.

Jesus joins us on our baptismal journey. He has a long road ahead of him, full of struggle and danger, and if he is to make his way, he needs to know who he is and why he's here. And that's exactly what he hears in his baptism:

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. And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

On the banks of the Jordan River, Jesus has an epiphany. He hears his true identity that he is God's beloved son, in whom God is well pleased. Of course, baptism didn't make Jesus God's beloved son. It simply revealed what was already true. To this point, Jesus hasn't healed or taught anyone. God's approval comes preloaded it seems. The words Jesus hears in his baptism are not a reward for a job well done. They are the foundation upon which Jesus will do his job well.

John thinks Jesus has come to whip us into shape, to give us a 30-day program for a new hot godly body, to join the endless procession of voices who promise to transform our lives if only we work a little harder than the next person. Instead, Jesus subverts all our expectations and hears the glorious truth that he is the beloved of God, not because of something he's done, but simply because he is. Now, the reason this story has so captivated my imagination isn't because God said this about Jesus. This story has captivated me in the hope that God says these same words over me and over you. That's our baptismal journey, to trust that what God says about Jesus in his baptism, God says over each one of us as well. The great struggle of our lives is trusting that you are the beloved of God, not because of something you've done or believe, but simply because you exist. You might even call it our one struggle to love.

We often associate love with weakness or niceness, but love is much more than that. **Mr. Rogers once said, "Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun, like struggle. To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now."** That's the struggle we are all in—to accept others, and ourselves I might add, exactly as they are, not how we wished they were or think they should be. That's what love is, total acceptance of who we are, which is exactly what Jesus hears in his baptism. This struggle is at the heart of the Christian life, and it's at the heart of the struggle racial equality as well.

Tomorrow our nation celebrates the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and for King love was the key to bringing about racial and economic equality in our world. The world King envisioned, the world he lived and died for, is what he called **the Beloved Community**, which is where everyone recognizes themselves and each other as the beloved of God. The goal isn't a community of mutual toleration, but that we might see each other as we

truly are—God’s beloved children. Jesus’ baptism, Mr. Rogers, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the struggle for racial equality, and my email signature—it’s all one struggle to love.

Baptism doesn’t create the truth, but instead reveals an already existing truth, that we are the beloved of God, not because of something we’d done or something we believe, but simply because we exist. That it turns out is enough. This is the good news from all eternity. The love you are searching for is already yours. It comes preloaded. Remember this good news spoken in both water and word, that you are and always have been the beloved of God.