

Every parent remembers a time when your child was in tears because someone called them a....well, fill in the blank – it changes as they get older. By the time you are an adult you have probably had people say mean, hurtful things about you and to you. And we have done the same to others. As much as that can affect us, there are other words that are even more powerful.

Is there anything more powerful than to hear the voice of someone important to us, and especially when it is our parents, saying, “I am so very proud of you. I love you more than I can describe. I am so pleased with the person you have become.” If one has this whisper of approval in his or her ears, all other competing voices of petty criticism are more easily drowned out. Parents have to know that your most precious gift to your children, outside of bringing them into the world safe and sound in the first place, is to send them out into the world with your clear word of blessing etched into their spirit. We will use the word blessing for this statement of worth and approval because it’s the best English word to capture how important this is. Like the birthright blessing in the Old Testament, this is the primary gift a parent bestows on their child, more important than a fortune bequeathed in a will.

And conversely, if one does not have this word of blessing from parents and the most intimate circle of loved ones, all the adoration of the faceless crowd can’t fill the hole that is left, and from that gap a person’s sense of self-worth and identity can easily leak out. There are adults, who parents are long-since deceased, who still long for their parents’ approval, who remember with pain how they never felt that their parents affirmed their choices in life,

or the person they became as an adult, or the career they chose. Some of these persons spend inordinate energy over-achieving in business, or trying to preserve their youthful beauty; trying to please a host of work colleagues, or just the expectations of popular culture, trying in vain to earn “the blessing” from these substitute “surrogate parents,” a blessing that could not be earned in the first place – because a blessing isn’t a reward for achievements, it is a statement of value.

In our Gospel lesson today from Saint Luke we hear God the Father granting just such a word of blessing to Jesus at the time of his baptism. Baptism is, basically, a public identification of a person with God. But baptism is also a moment to celebrate God’s affirmation of us too. And this was never more plain than at the baptism of Jesus. Jesus began his public ministry by making a public stand for God at the Jordon River, where John the Baptist called everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, to turn away from the world, and toward God. Jesus did just that, and made his first act of ministry a public stand for obedience to God’s purpose and mission for his life. But notice that God also took a public stand for Jesus too, with the heavenly voice speaking that powerful word of blessing every child longs to hear, and needs to hear. “You are my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” What a powerful word to hear, especially from God!

The late Dutch priest and author, Henri Nouwen, observed that this word of blessing from God was given to Jesus prior to preaching any sermons or parables, performing any miracles, or casting out any demons.

God's voice was not the applause of heaven for the good accomplishments of Jesus. At this point in the story, the resume of Jesus was almost a blank page. But this is precisely the nature of the parent's blessing for a child. It is not affirmation of good deeds—A's on report cards, touchdowns scored, contests won—although that's important too. The blessing is not in response to accomplishment or performance. The blessing is an affirmation of the value and delight the parent has in the child just because of who the child is, not just for what the child does. And then the child can go into the world and make a difference by their good actions, not in order to earn the blessing, but because the child has already received it.

In Luke's gospel the baptism is immediately followed by the temptations in the desert, but Jesus was able to resist all these lies because he never forgot the voice of God at his baptism. Jesus knew he was God's beloved Son, and that God was pleased with him. And that was enough. It is enough for any of us too.

We aren't renewing our baptismal promises today, but you remember how that works. I asked you folk, "DO YOU REJECT SATAN AND ALL HIS WORKS AND ALL HIS EMPTY PROMISES," And we all say I DO while inside our head we mentally cross our fingers and mumble, "SOMETIMES." Honestly we would all do a whole lot better at that rejecting sin thing if instead of telling ourselves that we are weak and inclined to fail, maybe we could start each day reminding ourselves that we are beloved by God, that he values us and always cares about us.

It frees us from seeking approval from all those lesser sources.

The next thing that happens in Luke's gospel is that immediately after the temptations, Jesus starts his public ministry. He sets out to share his experience of God with the rest of the world. Most of us were baptized as infants so we weren't able to run out and start spreading the good news before the water dried. But the follow on is still the same. In the waters of baptism God says to each of us "YOU ARE MY BELOVED CHILD, ON YOU MY FAVOR RESTS." However we do it, sharing that good news is how we keep faith with the waters of baptism and the blessing that we received the day we were reborn as a child of God.