

January 13, 2019
Luke 3:15-22
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Creekside COB

“Being”

Good morning! I am delighted that you are willing to learn a new song for this season of Epiphany -- at least, our musicians were willing, and you went along. This is a song that goes back to my growing up years, which is a ways back. There aren't very many good after-Christmas carols, but I think this qualifies as one of them. I think the lyrics -- you can check them out again on your handout, if you wish -- bring up some things that are worth pondering in the next few weeks.

If I were to ask you what the “work of Christmas” is, I'm sure many of you could tell me: it's hauling boxes of decorations down from the attic or up from the basement, setting up the tree, addressing cards, making cookies, attending holiday gatherings and worship services. Right? The thing is, all of that happens *before* Christmas, in preparation for Christmas. What is our work *after* Christmas, as a response to the birth of Jesus Christ, the light of the world? Of course we have to take down the tree and put away the decorations, but then what?

The weeks following Christmas are a good time to set the tone for the coming year: you may have done this already if you made resolutions for the new year; some of our ministry teams at Creekside set a calendar or goals for the next 12 months at this time of year. It's a good time to assess as individuals, a congregation and followers of Jesus Christ in the world who we are, what we do, and who we are called to be. Today and for the next two weeks, I'll be preaching about Being, Doing and Becoming. These are Big Picture issues, so we'll look at them broadly.

As you can imagine, being and doing are topics which have interested philosophers for as long as there have been philosophers. I want to share a few short quotes from great minds of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. [Slide 1] Freidrich Nietzche was a 19th C German philosopher, perhaps best known for saying that God is dead. Nietzche has been dead since 1900, so we know who got the last word there. But if we're pondering which comes first, being or doing, Nietzche goes with being. [Slide 2] Immanuel Kant lived in the late 18th C, and was an influence on Nietzche: he seems to believe that doing comes before being. [Slide 3] And finally, this guy who might not actually be a philosopher, who reminds us that maybe we can take this all too seriously. Maybe do be do be do is not such a bad philosophy of life.

Here's something even better -- the gospel of Luke, chapter 3 -- you'll find a very similar narrative in Matthew, chapter 3; the account of a philosopher who has far outlasted all those other guys, whom we celebrate as the light of the World. What does Jesus' life and ministry tell us about *our* life and ministry and what we are meant to do and be?

Luke 3 is the beginning of Jesus ministry: it picks up the narrative right where Betty left off two Sunday ago, when Jesus' parents found him at the Temple in Jerusalem, sitting with the priests and elders. Fast forward eighteen years, and Jesus' cousin John is preaching in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance. John is so popular that Jews wonder if he might be the Messiah whom they have been expecting, but John says no, there is one coming who is far more powerful. That one is Jesus. But rather than showing up and performing miracles, or healing, or even teaching, Jesus does an interesting thing: Jesus is baptized. Matthew is clear that it is John who does the baptizing, Luke is not specific.

I find it interesting that the single person in all of history who would not need to be baptized for repentance of sin would ask to be baptized -- presumably while the entire crowd was still gathered in or on the banks of the Jordan River. To this point, Jesus has done nothing to demonstrate that he is the Messiah, God's chosen, the light of the world. We know he was a precocious kid when he was 12,

but there's no indication that the crowd at the Jordan knew or cared who he was -- just another sinner, come to repent and be baptized.

And then the heavens open: literally, the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends in bodily form like a dove. How amazing would that have been? And then a voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And this is what I love about the gospel, and what I think the crux is of who we are. It is also why I think the Church of the Brethren gets it right on our practice of believer's baptism: the statement from heaven "with you I am well pleased" comes before Jesus has done anything. This is the very beginning of his ministry; the only thing Jesus has done is to come to John to be baptized.

To me, this means that being comes before doing -- or to put it another way, identity comes before purpose. Of course these things influence each other through our lives -- we'll talk about that in the coming weeks -- but our ministry begins when we claim who we are. And who we are is God's beloved children -- sons and daughters of God. That means that the work of Christmas is first to acknowledge that the Messiah has come; that Jesus is the light of the world. And before we start rushing out to get busy doing things, we need to claim who we are, just a Jesus was baptized, prayed and was blessed before his work began. This isn't a long chapter in the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, but it's a crucial one.

If you we are fortunate, we have been raised with the assumption or even told explicitly that we are valued and loved -- not because we are perfect or even better-than-average, but simply because we are: we are beloved children or grandchildren. It's probably not news to you that not everyone is given this gift. Some children are actually abused or neglected; many more are affected in ways which may be less obvious -- with the message that they don't deserve love and care, that they are consistently disappointing, that they don't matter. Of course it isn't just children who get these messages, and adults who internalized their unworthiness as children are likely to carry that into their adult relationships: including how they parent their own children. I believe that a fundamental ministry of the church is to affirm that each person is valued and loved by God. We can't say it too often, because there are lots of other voices out there saying

something else. If you were listening, you heard Angi say this again and again during the children's stories in Advent; but it isn't a message only for children. Jesus was 30 years old -- surely mature enough to know who he was and what he might have to do in the years ahead; closer to the mind and the heart of God than anyone else has ever been -- and God still chose to make a dramatic and public statement "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

I think the public nature of that statement is important. It may be someone else believing in us which sets us on a path to believing in ourselves. That's not gift should remain private. You've probably heard me mention the Brethren man who loved his wife sooo much, he almost told her. We in the church have been famously -- or infamously -- good at withholding affirmation and justifying it by saying things like, "they were just doing the right thing," or "you can't outwork God," or my favorite, [nothing].

None of this denies the fact that we sin, and that we need to confess and repent and repair the relationships we damage by our harmful words and actions toward God and other people. But I believe that it is actually easier to repent when we believe we are of value to God and to other people: not because hoping that they'll let it slide this time, but because our value isn't calculated by what we do or what we have done, so we don't have to keep trying to convince God and other people that we're someone we're not. It is being loved for who we are which gives us the courage to repent and change and try harder to be who God has called us to be. Jim Strathdee's chorus says, "If you follow and love, you'll learn the mystery of what you meant to do and be." God says, "You are my Beloved. In you I am well pleased." Sinatra says "do be do be do." I'm going to go with God. I hope you will too, and that we can follow the light of the world together. And all God's people said, Amen.