

A Spiritual Check-Up **Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

Abigail and Daniel Harkness were faithful Quakers in New York, in an era when proper women were expected to behave and dress with modesty, and gentility. However, Abigail had a beautiful red coat, which was deemed by members of their faith community to not be modest at all, and instead to represent the evils of the world. In the eyes of the faith community, the coat was not modest, proper, or appropriate, and when Daniel and Abigail refused to apologize for the red coat, they were expelled from the flock. Their great-granddaughter Georgia, stood on the shoulders of her great-grandparents. Georgia was a person of great faith, piety, and social activism. When told she could not attend the all male Boston University School of theology, she instead earned a Ph.D. and became the first woman to teach at a Christian seminary, as Professor of Applied Theology. Dr. Harkness focused her teaching and writing on the practical application of theology to the pressing social issues of her day, ranging from women's rights to racism, war and peace, international relations, and, later in her life, full civil rights for gay and lesbian people. Dr. Harkness, who wrote over 30 books and many articles, confronted Karl Barth on his theology of male subordination, was influential in helping women gain ordination rights in the United Methodist Church in 1956.

Dr. Harkness, when teaching at Garrett Theological Seminary in Evanston, was known to wear red high heels around the seminary, proudly claiming her gender and position. In a lasting tradition, male and female Garrett grads proudly wear red shoes, remembering the faith and determination of those who have gone before. Her deeply rooted faith, powerful resolve, and determination to not let others' limited vision limit her own changed the church and the world as she continues to impact and inspire folks.

As we begin this series on living whole lives, I think it's important to remember those individuals of faith who inspire us. Remembering their stories helps to inspire our own and keep us focused. This morning, churches everywhere will remember the story of Jesus' baptism. A day that was certainly memorable for all who were present. In Matthew's version, John protests, saying that Jesus should be the one to baptize him, but in Luke's account, we have just a few verses. Mark kept his account short and sweet, and John's gospel simply includes John the Baptist giving testimony about the whole affair.

Just imagine it. While John is preaching, teaching, and baptizing, Jesus comes to the water. Jesus shows up, right in the group of people who were struggling, trying to turn their lives around. They were a sinful lot, and they knew it. Then this other guy comes to the group, probably had his own share of flaws, not looking too out of the ordinary...at first. Jesus is baptized, just as all the others, asked to turn and repent, finding new life through the waters, and as he was praying, "the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit dove rested on him, and a Voice proclaimed, You are my Son, the Beloved, with you, I am well pleased." That must have been quite a moment.

Henri Nouwen writes "As a Christian, I am firmly convinced that the decisive moment of Jesus's public life was his baptism, when he heard the divine affirmation, "You are my beloved on

whom my favor rests.” In this core experience, Jesus is reminded in a deep, deep way of who he really is.” Following his baptism, Jesus goes to the wilderness for 40 days, is tempted by the Satan, and then begins his public ministry. Maybe Jesus needed to be baptized, so everyone was clear that he was also seeking relationship with God. Maybe he needed to be present with those folks gathered at the river so they saw him as human. Maybe he came to the waters needing to hear the voice of God reminding him of his calling, reminding him of God’s claim – he is God’s Beloved.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes “You see the problem. We spend a lot of time in the Christian church talking about God’s love for sinners, but we sure do go to a lot of trouble not to be mistaken for one of them. Guilt by association and all that. Only Jesus – our leader and our Lord – did not seem too concerned about that. In him, God’s being-with-us included God’s being in the river with us, in the flesh with us, in the sorrow of repentance and the joy of new life with us.”

God is in this whole messy life with us, and God wants us to allow God to share in it – a spiritual life invites us to abide in our relationship with our Creator, knowing that God loves us, delights in us, and calls each one of us God’s own Beloved. This week in Bible Study we considered the ways that we all need to rest in that statement a bit, remembering that God claims each of us. It may be easier for us to accept God’s claim on sweet infants rather than on us, God loves our children, God loves other people’s children...but God loves me...sure I guess, but not if I really think about it.

Like Jesus, our baptism is only the beginning of what God is doing through us. As we abide in our relationship with our God, we find peace and hope and joy. We remember who we are. We remember Whose we are. And that gives us strength for the road ahead.

Some of us are faithful about going to our regular doctor’s appointments and some of us resist that, and yet how often do we examine our spiritual health – how is our connection to God? Have we been faithful in praying, worship, turning to God with our sorrows and not hiding them? DO we allow God’s image, God’s love, God’s patience, God’s kindness to shine forth?

Later today, I will have the honor of being officially installed as your Senior Minister, a calling I accept with a great deal of humility, a little bit of fear, and a lot of peace. Choosing to say yes to what God is doing, now and throughout my life, has only been possible when I’ve spent a ton of time in prayer, asking for God’s direction. I had a lovely visit with one of our members this week who reminded me of all the ways God prepares us and equips us without our knowing – we choose to learn more about this or that, we meet folks and learn lessons, and later down the line, those lessons are exactly the ones that give us the words and presence to minister to a friend or a loved one. Our spiritual lives – the ways we connect with God and listen for God’s voice absolutely give us the courage and the presence to participate in building God’s kingdom here on earth – it allows us to be a part of dismantling systems of patriarchy which have only allowed men to serve in various places of power; dismantling racism, homophobia – we bear witness to all that God has done and all that God is continuing to do!!!