

Tracy Daub  
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Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

## NAMED AND CLAIMED

The desire to belong is one of the most powerful desires of the human heart. It no doubt has some evolutionary component—maybe from the time when survival for the earliest human beings against saber toothed cats and hostile neighbors depended upon belonging to a community of support and protection. Belonging is all about connecting with others, about finding a place of acceptance. What we know is that this need to belong is both an emotional as well as physical. And even though we today no longer have to fend off saber tooth cats, belonging is still a core human need and is important for our wellbeing.

But from the earliest days of childhood, our sense of belonging is threatened. We may recall how other children in school rejected us and made fun of us because of some difference, or how classmates passed over us when choosing players for a game, or how we never got an invitation to a popular kid's birthday party. The message was clear: you do not belong; you are not one of us.

And as we age, society continues to deliver the message that some people do not belong and are not welcome in the various spheres of human associations. The dominate culture, whatever that may be in any particular situation, conveys explicitly *and* implicitly that certain people are not welcome: women, gays or lesbians, Jews or Muslims, unwed mothers, Protestants or Catholics, blacks, Asians, Latinos, immigrants, Democrats or Republicans, disabled people, mentally ill people—the list inexhaustible. At some time in our lives we may have found ourselves on that list of “unwelcome” people, or we may have personally known those who

were, and we will have experienced or witnessed the deep wounds that come from being told, “you do not belong.”

It is especially tragic that the Christian Church, both historically as well as today, is among the most culpable in the practice of exclusion. Narrow boundaries around who could or even still can belong among church leadership excluded women, minorities, gays and lesbians, and the disabled. A huge portion of Christian history involved hostilities and violence within the Christian community over *beliefs*—over whose theological beliefs about God or Jesus or the Church were considered right and those that were considered wrong. Just holding a point of view that was considered different from the dominate group could have you burned at the stake. There is no clearer way of stating “you do not belong, than to say, “We are going to kill you because of your ideas.”

And if you should commit an act considered sinful by the Church, you could be shunned by your neighbors, or excommunicated by the Church, or banished from the community. While most Christian communities do not banish or excommunicate on a regular basis anymore, there is still all too often the message of rejection. Denominational statements and policies around gays and lesbians, around women’s roles, and around who can and cannot receive the sacraments, makes it clear that not everyone really belongs. The Christian Church has this shameful history of telling people they do not belong.

And because the Christian Church represents God, the message that comes through the Church’s rejection is that God has rejected you as well. And that belief of God’s rejection has deep and long-term repercussions. That message, that God does not accept you, is very hard to overcome. I’ve known people who were reluctant to receive communion because they felt that

because of who they were or because of their past, they were not worthy enough, that they did not deserve God's love.

That is why some people hide the realities of their lives from others in the Church and why some have left the Church altogether—because of the judging eyes of the Church and thus, as some perceive, the judging eyes of God. They have been taught that they are unacceptable, that they are soiled by the muck and mud and grime of this world and their own behaviors, and they cannot find a place of acceptance in the holy community of God.

It is astonishing how the Christian Church could get it so wrong! The message of Jesus was not about creating an exclusive club of especially holy people but of God's radical *inclusion* of and love toward all people. Jesus' entire life reflected this radical message of belonging but we especially see it revealed here in the story of his baptism.

Jesus' baptism has often puzzled Christians. If Jesus was sinless, as the Church teaches, then why would he need to be baptized?

Let's consider again what belonging means. Belonging is about forging bonds of connection with another. Belonging is about offering a place of acceptance. When Jesus steps into the Jordan to be baptized, he draws close to humanity to strengthen our connection with God. As the mud of the river bed oozes up between Jesus' toes, Jesus connects with all of us who are splattered by the mud and muck and grime of this world and of our lives. And instead of rejection, Jesus offers us a place of belonging in God's love.

Luke's version of this baptismal story is a little different from what we find in Matthew and Mark's accounts. In those other gospel accounts, John baptizes all the crowds but then Jesus' baptism is singled out in the story as a special moment, set apart. But here in Luke's account we are simply told, "Now when all the people had been baptized, and when Jesus had

also been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him . . .” Luke’s version of this story leads us to believe that Jesus was just one among the crowds of folks who all stepped into the Jordan together and received baptism. His received no special fanfare and it was only afterwards, as he was praying that the heavens opened and we hear those words, “You are my Son, the beloved.” We are left to imagine Jesus receiving baptism alongside all of us. There Jesus stands, at the baptismal font, alongside you and me, alongside every one of us, drawing close to us with the gift of belonging.

You see, baptism does not bestow God’s love upon us. After baptism we are not suddenly loved by God whereas before we were not. Nor does baptism make us members of a special club—the club of those whom God accepts. Baptism does not bestow God’s love upon us. Instead, baptism *acknowledges* the love that *already* exists for you and for me and for Jesus.

In Isaiah, God tells the people of God, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” You are mine. That is a clear affirmation of belonging! You belong to God. And not in some anonymous way. God knows your name. God calls you by name. That is what happens in the sacrament of baptism, right? When you were baptized your name was declared during that sacrament to emphasize that God’s love and mercy and acceptance are offered to you, specifically to you!

Should baptism change us? Absolutely. Because we belong to God and know it, because we have received God’s acceptance and love and mercy, we are inspired to live as God’s beloved people. In baptism we are claimed by God—we belong to God. But we are also called by God to follow the way of Jesus.

But we don’t always follow Jesus. After our baptism you and I are still imperfect. We are still splattered by the muck and mud and grime of mistakes and wrongdoings. But still Jesus

advances toward us, stepping into the mud and muck himself in love, desiring to forge the connection of belonging. Nothing could dim God's love for you. God always looks at you and says, "Ahh, that's my child!" And not some generic child, but the specific child you are, named by God, claimed by God, and loved by God.