

January 6 marks a new season in the Christian Calendar with Epiphany. Epiphany is book ended by two high seasons of the Christian year – it comes just after Advent & Christmas and precedes Lent & Easter.

I guess one can call it the season of Epiphany as the time is traditionally devoted to the “life of Jesus”, rather than the “teaching of Jesus”. The word, Epiphany, comes from the Latin and Greek, and it means a “**sudden perception or insight into a divine reality through revelation**”, and the reality which is revealed to us is the nature of Jesus – Who He is and where He comes from. So until the season of Lent, which comes early this year in February, we will be looking at the “life of Jesus” to gain some insights into his nature and his identity.

All four Gospels mentions Jesus’ baptism, but Luke’s Gospel is unique; There is no mention of who baptized Jesus or where he was Baptized. In fact, Luke mentions just before our reading that Herod imprisoned John. Now, I think, Luke as a truth teller, edits these details, not because they are untrue, but because Luke’s focus and interest is in what happens after the baptism, so he eliminates the significance of John or the Jordan river, which Matthew tells us in great detail. In fact, Luke gives no details at all about the Baptism itself, but leads us to what happened after it, which clearly is the main focus of his story. By his editing, Luke points us toward verse, 22; “**You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.**”

What we learn from this verse is this; Jesus as the Son of God, enjoyed a loving and empowering relationship with the Father. Now, I can spend several hours unpacking all that this verse says to us, but in the interest of time, let me jump right to the application and what it might be saying to us. What is so important to grasp about this loving relationship Jesus enjoyed with the Father is that, it is pattern that shapes our relationship with God and others. Because we are made in the image of God, the Triune relationship of empowerment and love share by the Father, Son and the Spirit, is the very foundation of the kinds of relationships we are to experience in our lives as well.

Let me ask you, do you hear these words in your heart; “You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased”, either from God in your heart and mind, or through it being voiced by others? When I say, “hear”, I don’t mean hearing the mere words, but hearing it in the sense that it is heart felt experience of love and encouragement. Or, is the inner dialogue that only you can hear, or the words spoken to you by other around you, echoes only words of condemnation, judgment, and criticism? Do you think God is well pleased with you? The phrase, “I am well pleased” comes from the Greek word, which literally means to “have a high and good opinion”. Do you, in the deepest part of you, think that God has a “good and high opinion of you”, and do you hear those words in bodily form, descending like a dove, through the voice of others around you?

To help those of you who find hearing the voice of encouragement and love fleeting, let me share my story with you. I grew up under two parents who truly loved me and cared for me and did what they believed to true and right. But the culture in which they were

brought up and raised me and my sister was, honor and shame based, Confucius, culture. In this culture, praising and showing affection to your children is a fool's errand. Instead you are correct and teach your children so that they may avoid shame and receive honor. So, my entire communication and dialogue with my parents were criticism of what I need to correct. What I did right or good was never communicated, not because they I didn't have any, but expressing them were unnecessary. What was required was to correct the errors and mistakes as defined by the honor-shame culture.

"Criticism" in honor-shame based culture is the expression of love! Here is the problem I encountered. The critical voice was so frequent and common that it became my own voice. I am not sure when I became conscious of my own inner voice, but over that last few years I came to realize that I seldom heard or felt the words. "You are my Son, my beloved, whom I am well pleased."

If anyone here today is wanting a new challenge for 2016, let me propose one for our community, and that is, one of changing "the tone and content of our voice". Just as the Father held and spoke "words of high opinion of His Son", can we as people of God, as Fathers and Mothers, sons and daughters, as neighbors and as co-workers, hold high opinion of others around us, and like doves descending from Heaven, "voice words of love, encouragement, and affirmation" wit others around us.

Philippians 4 shows us how we might do that;

8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

By our nature now, we are far prone to see the fault and short-comings of others, but it takes discipline, patience and kindness and gentleness to notice the good that is in all people. If you are like me, you probably don't even have to try very hard to see what's wrong with people, but it takes time and focus to see the good, and to be an encouraging voice to affirm those qualities.

May the words of encouragement of heaven lead and guide you in your relationship with others in the coming year! Amen.