



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
 January 11, 2026
 The First Sunday after Epiphany
 “The Beloved”
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Matthew 3:13-17 (NRSVue)

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

“The Beloved”

Baptism is a deeply embodied sign and seal of our belovedness.

So embodied, in fact, that it can be bit awkward.

For example, I do this motion with my hand in the water, every time I perform a baptism. I want you to see an abundance of water flowing, not just sprinkles. And, I know you can't see this: but every single time I raise my hand, water drips down my arm, goes up my sleeve, and settles itself moistly in my armpit. I swear, it feels like it stays there the rest of the hour.

Baptism is a deeply embodied sign and seal of our belovedness.

A Baptism trick, I learned from a mentor, is always to use hot water in the font, not just cold tap water. Again, we don't just sprinkle here at Westminster. We want to

see the water. So, we scoop up big handfuls of water. And if it's warm water, it's not nearly so jarring to those who are baptized.

Of course, if it's a sleeping baby, all bets are off. When I baptize a sleeping baby, I'm just making sure I've got a good hold on them beforehand, in case she wakes up and goes ballistic.

Baptism is a deeply embodied sign and seal of our belovedness.

It's a place where we promise to care for each other, and not just our souls either, but our hearts and our bodies too. In baptism, we proclaim, our whole selves are showered with God's love and God's care.

It is an ancient affirmation. And, perhaps, we need it all the more today.

In the 3rd Chapter of Matthew, when Jesus comes before John in the Jordon to be baptized, John protests, saying, "I need to be baptized by you. [Why] do you come to me?"

Jesus responds, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

These are the very first words spoken by Jesus in all the New Testament. Up until that point, we have only read about his infancy.

The righteousness he talks about, we're going to see, the more we read into Matthew this year, is all about being in right relation to God and to fellow human beings.

Here, when Jesus talks about righteousness, he is rebuking John's sense of hierarchy in Baptism. John thinks the one who does the Baptizing is higher in God's eyes than the one Baptized. Just a few verses earlier, he describes the coming messiah, saying "I am not worthy to untie his sandals."

But Jesus says no:

Baptism is not about worthiness.

It's not about one of us above the other.

It's more about recognizing what we have in common:

the love and care of God for each of us.

This week, I heard a sermon on this same passage by the Rev. Dr. Damon Williams, Senior Pastor of Providence Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta.¹ Rev. Williams points out, that at this point in the Gospel, Jesus hasn't really done anything, so all of John's talk about worthiness is a bit of a moot point, anyway.

In the beautiful, poetic cadence of the Black Preaching tradition, this is how Dr. Williams said it:

*Before Jesus achieved, God approved
Before Jesus performed, God was pleased
Before Jesus did anything public, God declared something
eternal*

*Likewise, for every child of God under the sound of my voice, he said, you begin this year **not** scrambling for worthiness, but standing in belovedness.*

I love that: Beginning the year standing in belovedness.

Is that how you began this year?
Remembering your belovedness?
Because that is the essence of Baptism:
 this embodied sign and seal of God's love and care.

That is why, when God speaks for the very first time in the entire New Testament, this is what we hear:

A voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

Beloved.

Bodies and souls that are beloved, simply by the fact that we are children of God. This is the claim of our Baptism, found in the 3rd chapter of Matthew.

In the early church, to underline that God cares for our bodies *and* our souls, those who came forward for baptism were naked when they were dipped under the water.

 Talk about a deeply embodied act.

Before their baptism, they were asked:

¹ Damon Williams, "Why Was Jesus Baptized Only Once?" Day1 Podcast, January 11, 2026. <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/6957dfef6615fbb0c3002d90/why-was-jesus-baptized-only-once-episode-4216-damon-p-williams-matthew-3-13-17-january-11-2026>

- *Dost thou renounce Satan and all his angels, and all his works, and all his services, and all his pride?*

And then they were plunged three times, under the cold water, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The late Christian writer Rachel Held Evans remarks on that ancient practice, saying that in *These days, most Churches don't start their resurrection Sunday service with a bunch of wet naked people renouncing Satan and his demons*. It might just scare off the visitors.²

The ancient practice also might make you wonder:

- How does this whole renouncing Satan stuff square with the Baptism passages of the Bible?
- If Baptism is about love, not judgement: Why talk about sin?

I mean, when you think about sin, does it make you remember how beloved you are? Probably not.

Rachel Held Evans says that perhaps we need to reorient how we think about sin and demons, in light of what we say at our Baptism. If Baptism is about just how beloved we are, body and soul, then, perhaps we should think of sin, as that which blocks us from remembering we are beloved.

This is a longer quote from Rachel Held Evans. She writes:

Indeed our sins: Hate, fear, greed, jealousy, lust, materialism, pride – join in a chorus, you might even say a legion, of voices locked in an ongoing battle with God to lay claim over our identity, to convince us that we belong to them, that [our sins] have the right to name us.

Whereas God calls the baptized 'beloved,' demons call her: 'addict, slut, sinner, failure, fat, worthless, faker, screw-up.'

Whereas God calls her 'child,' the demons tempt us with [worldly] titles like: 'rich, powerful, pretty, important, religious, esteemed, accomplished, right' ... We all long

² Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Santa Ross, CA: Nelson Books, 2015), 17-23.

for someone to tell us who we are. The great struggle of the Christian life is to take God's name for us: beloved, and to believe that that is enough.

Believe that that is enough.

Beloved do you believe that is enough?

I so love what Rachel Held Evans is doing there:

All those labels, all that shame we carry; or even the pride we carry about our status, or our place above others in the hierarchy. Anything that has ever made you or your neighbor feel less than beloved. All that, is the voice of the demon.

The voice of the demon.

- Beloved, what demonic voices have tried to lay claim to you, this week?
- What voices have sought to label you, or your neighbor, or your fellow human being, as less-than beloved, this week?
- What voices have we heard in opposition to the central claim made at this font: that everyone, everyone, everyone, is beloved of God, and deserving of care?
- What demonic voice has sought to demean our humanity, this week?

We've heard a lot of words this week. A lot of names.

Some of them life giving:

On her Instagram account, a 37-year-old woman named Renee Nicole Good called herself a 'poet, a writer, a wife, and a mom.'³

When the BBC interviewed her mother last week, her mom called Renee Good 'one of the kindest people I've ever known.'

Likewise, her ex-husband was interviewed by that same news outlet. For them, he used the term 'devoted Christian' when asked to describe Renee Good.

Another friend, who had grown up with Renee Good, recounted going on mission trips with her as a teenager, and attending Bible Studies together at Presbyterian Churches overseas.

³ All quotes below from Tiffany Wertheimer, "Who was Renee Nicole Good, the woman killed by ICE?" BBC, January 9, 2026. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1jepdly256o>

But there were other voices too.

None of us knew her.

I'd be willing to guess most of us, this week, saw the last moments of her life, captured on cell phone video.

Probably, most of us heard members of our federal government call her a 'domestic terrorist' and a 'deranged leftist' this week, conclusions made apparently without any investigation at all, into her death.

There have been others too: a lot of names, thrown around this week.

One thing you didn't heard, though, in the aftermath, by those in power, is a name that we, as a Baptism community, have got to keep going back to, over and over and over again, especially when the life, the well-being, of any of the children of God is threatened:

She was a beloved.

She was a beloved child of God.

I should nuance that a bit.

Not the part about Renee Good being a beloved child of God. That was and is true, full stop.

What I need to nuance is what I just said. The part about not hearing the word 'beloved' so much in all the words used in the aftermath of her death, to describe her this week.

Maybe that term wasn't said, much, exactly.

But, did you see, all the church people who came out in Minneapolis, and not just Minneapolis, but in cities all around this country, in the days following, clergy and laity alike:

Marching, lighting candles, protesting peacefully, and proclaiming, with their bodies and their souls, that she was beloved, body and soul.

Closer to home, that very same day of the shooting, I had coffee with a member of our community. And, this member of our community, told me, even before we had

heard the news about Renee Good, that a friend of his had been picked up, locally, by ICE, and was about to be sent to a detention center in Louisiana.

This friend has been in America since he was 3 years old. He's the father of an American citizen. A kid who is my kids' age.

Later that night, this member of our community posted the news about his friend on a group chat with several of our members.

And someone in that chat who is a lawyer gave out his email address.

And another donated to the family and said, let us know if there are any more needs.

And again, in that group chat, no one used the word, 'beloved.'

But...it was said, nonetheless, right? In Spirit and in deed.

Beloved, baptism is a deeply embodied act.
Where we proclaim that we are all beloved children of God.
Worthy of love and care, in body and in spirit.

And maybe that's easy to say, on a Sunday morning, dressed up in our Sunday best.

But it's something that doesn't just stop here, either, at the font.

Let us always remember to embody that promise, wherever we go.

When everybody else is using words to tear each other down, to tear each other apart.

Let us, this Baptism community, be the first to use that word, that God uses, to describe each and every single person we meet, no matter their creed or nationality.

They are first and most importantly:

Beloved.

Beloved.

Beloved.

In the name of the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of us all. Amen.