

“My Child, the Beloved”: MLK and Matthew 3:13-17

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~1700 words

Prayer for Illumination

Let us pray. God, your Scripture reads, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer” (Ps. 19:14). In this moment, we call upon these sacred words and ask that you guide our hearts and thinking as we make meaning of your Scripture and the world You have helped to craft. In all this, we pray, Amen.

Sermon

“And a voice from the heavens said, ‘This is my Child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased’ (Matt. 3:17). I’ve always loved this piece of Scripture. In fact, at my desk in my apartment during divinity school, I kept a sticky note that had this exact verse. It reminded me, when I was stressed or overwhelmed of lacking clarity and confidence, of God’s vast and encompassing love that has stretched from the patriarchs to the prophets to Jesus and his Body. I had always felt so moved and comforted by this scene of Jesus’ baptism depicted in the Gospel of Matthew. As we heard, Jesus comes from Galilee to John the Baptist. In verse fourteen, John wishes to stop Jesus from becoming baptized, asking, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Or, in other words, “What is the Messiah doing here, asking *me* to bestow a sacrament on someone like *him*? I’m certainly not sacred enough or important enough or wise enough to help the divine in this way.” But, Jesus convinces John that it is “proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15).

This interaction between Jesus and John has puzzled scholars and theologians for centuries. Douglas A. Hare, the late, contemporary author, writes in his commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew, “Why would Matthew regard it as God’s will that the Messiah be baptized? The most likely answer to this question stresses Jesus’ solidarity with sinners...As the one destined to be their lord and king he accepts the sacrament of the renewal of God’s people. In doing so, he takes the first step on the road to Calvary” (1993). Once Jesus is baptized, Scripture tells us, the heavens open to him, and he sees God’s spirit descend like a dove and delight him, with the spirit’s voice saying, “This is my Child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). God illuminates Jesus with praise *because* he took on the task of stepping into his humanness and receiving the sacrament of baptism. God illuminates Jesus with praise *because* he humbles himself and furthers his oneness with humankind. It is, in fact, proper—not just to fulfill the righteousness of people, but to fulfill *all* righteousness. We may even be bold enough to say that Jesus’ humility—allowing a human to grace him—fulfilled even divine righteousness.

“This is my Child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). You may be wondering why my translation is a bit different from the one you’ve read or have heard before. In most Bibles, the translators opt for the word “son” instead of “child” to describe the being to whom the Holy Spirit is speaking. We, of course, assume that the Holy Spirit *is* speaking to

Jesus because the Spirit illuminated him in the previous verse. The Greek word *uiός* does indeed mean son and is used in both divine and non-divine cases in Scripture. However, *uiός* is an example of a masculine generic noun. Like in many languages, sometimes nouns are gendered by default—they have a masculine article or denotation. In addition to “son,” *uiός* can also mean “descendent,” “offspring,” or perhaps “child,” depending on your translation. Take this in contrast with the word θυγάτηρ (*thugater*), which strictly means “daughter,” or γέννημα, which means “child,” “offspring,” “brood,” or “fruit” without any indicated gender. If we wanted to approach this translation through the lens of Jesus’ universal belonging to humanity and divinity, maybe the word “child” for *uiός* is more fitting. When John baptizes Jesus, the Holy Spirit may recognize Jesus as *uiός*—as a child just like any other of God.

In the UCC, we believe that we are recognized as members of the Body of Christ through Baptism. When we receive these sacred waters, we are before our loved ones, often before our congregation, and before God acknowledging this call to love, service, peace, and justice. As Galatians tells us, “For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” The Body of Christ is all-encompassing and non-exclusive—maybe that’s what *uiός* is trying to tell us here.

So, friends, here we are thinking about baptism and divine/human interdependence. What does that all mean this weekend? I’m sure most of you know that every year at around this time, we observe and honor the work and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I would imagine that mostly everyone in this room is very familiar with Dr. King. In fact, some of us lived during his political activism, his non-violent campaigns to release the oppressed and stand up to violent and brutal authority and unjust law, and his ministry in the 1950s and 1960s. Some of us here lived through his assassination in 1968 at the age of 39, days before Congress passed the Civil Rights Act. Dr. King’s ministry was all-encompassing and non-exclusive. He wrote on, preached on, and risked his body and spirit to advocate for the rights of Black and Native folks, workers, and laborers. He stressed and uplifted interfaith and ecumenical leadership and representation, challenging intersectional and multi-layered hierarchies of power and supremacy. His nonviolent and anti-war beliefs came from a deep conviction in Christ’s teachings to love enemies and neighbors and turn the other cheek.

Through biopics like *Selma* from 2014, we also know that Dr. King’s life was incredibly difficult. He endured beatings, violence, threats to himself and his family, close to thirty arrests, government surveillance and wiretapping, and more. Yet, he kept going. He kept persisting. On the day he died, he said to a crowd in Memphis, “I left Atlanta this morning and then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats or talk about the threats that were out, or what would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers. Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop, and I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place, but I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will” (NPR 2008).

God's will led Dr. King to become a prophetic voice of our modern times. He spoke with the hope of change against the reality of racist and classist structural violence—a reality that we still are called to fight against with fervor fifty-five years after his murder. Where did this hope come from? How can we, removed from MLK but still deeply entangled in his legacy, tap into the hope of change that we've heard time and time again in "I Have a Dream?" Perhaps, the insight we need goes back to the Scripture we've heard today: universal and humble love. Maybe, if we, too, are as bold as Jesus to become baptized by humility and love, we will know our interconnectedness—we will know inherent dignity and divinity in each person. We will know the potential for hope.

I could have brought many, many readings and speeches from Dr. King to you today. But, the one I really felt connected most to the passage of Jesus' baptism came, in fact, from a jail cell. In 1963, MLK was arrested and jailed in Birmingham, Alabama—this was the thirteenth of his twenty-ninth arrest. He wrote a letter—perhaps the most famous of his writings next to "I Have a Dream"—to a group of clergypeople who had denounced his activism, calling it "unwise and untimely" (King 1963). His letter indicates why he was in Birmingham. Put plainly, he writes, "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town" (King 1963). He could not "sit idly by" knowing of the injustice in Birmingham, for "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (King 1963). The core of his letter recognizes the desperate reality of injustice and the hope of love, inspired by Christ's ministry. He states that Jesus' God consciousness *is* love. Reflecting on his opponents' labeling of him as an extremist, he writes, "But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you'" (King 1963).

If you find yourself in downtown Boston needing a place to contemplate love, I know just the one. Just this past Friday, "The Embrace," a statue of the intertwining hands of Dr. King and Coretta Scott, was unveiled in Boston Common. This statue was designed by Black artist Hank Willis Thomas, and it is a permanent monument in one of the most iconic parts of Boston. In this space, we are reminded of our call to love and justice in the very city where Dr. King and Coretta Scott met.

Friends, you are children of God, loved by God and by this community. You are beloved. *We* are beloved. All of God's people are beloved. Let's go forward to create inclusivity and equity and recognize the beloved dignity and divinity in each other. Amen.

Douglas A. Hare, *Matthew*

Letter from a Birmingham Jail,
https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

NPR, "King's Final Speech, 40 Years Later,"
<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89336517>

NRSVUE Bible Translation

WBUR, "A representation of vulnerability and security": Memorial honoring the Kings opens on Boston Common,"
<https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/01/12/a-representation-of-vulnerability-and-security-memorial-honoring-the-kings-opens-on-boston-common>