

## **Sermon: Beloved by God**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Jan 7, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Although I am not an user, I've been following the evolution of Twitter, the social media platform, with keen interest for years. Twitter, or should it now be called 'X', started off as a novel and ingenious idea. Built by Tad Hirsch, a student activist of the MIT Media Lab, to help other activists organize protests at the 2004 Republican National Convention. With its ease of use and exchanging direct messages in 140 characters or less, Twitter under Jack Dorsey, one of the co-founders, soon caught on, first with conference goers then the general public.

By 2009, Twitter was named the Word of the Year by the Global Language Monitor, declaring it "a new form of social interaction", and 'tweeting' soon became a common lexicon in the English language. The company later added various functionalities to share photos, audios, and video, but still keeping that ever so popular direct text messaging 'in 140 characters or less'. At one point, almost every major News organization is on the platform. Twitter became more than just a network for social sharing, it became the primary hub for information dissemination. Even if one doesn't use it, one's life is ever so influenced by it. The Twitter community would soon boast 500 million users worldwide.

The global use of Twitter is sometimes overlooked by those in North America. Globally, it continues to be used by activists to organize and champion various causes, in the Middle East, Africa, and South America. The so-called 'Twitter revolutions' have even brought down governments, a number of them in Moldova, Tunisia, and Egypt. One could say the 2021 storming of the United States Capital orchestrated by the outgoing President Donald Trump, came close to doing that. Imagine how different the world might look had that happened.

The rise of Twitter acutely highlights the power of the social media to connect people to a common identity, and to united them in a common struggle for a common cause. The fall of Twitter, under its new owner Elon Musk, well, that's another story altogether, a story that is still being written, and I won't go into that today. What I want to highlight is the social need

tapped into by Twitter. People are social animals. We all have this inherent need to be connected to a larger identity—an identity that is more than ourselves. Beyond simple connection, we have this inherent want to participate in a common cause—a cause to re-shape the community we belong to, to re-shape even the world.

That is how I see the Christian faith. Faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has always united people from all walks of life, in every corners of the world. Being baptized with water into the Christian faith is akin to registering and download the Twitter app, with one key difference, the Almighty God, the Creator of the Cosmos is the founder, the owner, the big boss.

The Scripture passage today, of Mark 1, takes us to the river Jordan, to John as the baptizer and Jesus the baptizee. Now John's baptism was strictly for the purpose of cleansing, of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It was done from a human initiative, in preparation for the coming Kingdom of God. Strictly speaking, baptism was not a Jewish tradition, not really part of the Torah. There may have been some regulations on washing parts of the body, for religious purpose, but immersing the whole body for repentance, for the forgiveness of sins was, in the time of John, a novelty.

Nevertheless, the Bible tells us that, "*the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.*" That must have been quite a sight. Imagine peasants, prophets and priest, all going to Jordan, all confessing their sins before John, with the act of being baptized the great equalizer. Then Jesus appears.

Now the Gospel of Mark does not describe the initial interaction between John and Jesus. We find that in the Gospel of Matthew, in chapter 3. We find John, at first, being reluctant to baptize Jesus, for he recognized who Jesus is, saying "*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*" Jesus, although one without sin, nevertheless affirmed John's ministry as originated from God. So he answered John, "*Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.*"

So Jesus was baptized by John in the river Jordan, and just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "***You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.***" God spoke, and the identity of Jesus was revealed to all.

Just as when God first spoke, in Genesis 1, light came to be, separated from darkness, and God saw that the light was good. God now speaks, Christ Jesus comes, overcoming darkness, and God saw the beloved Son, as good and 'well pleased'. Imagine being introduced by God in such a public way. That must have been glorious.

Love of our earthly parents is great, but limited and often conditional. But the love of the heavenly Father is so much greater, unlimited and unconditional. Imagine being baptized into such love, such identity, such acceptance, "***You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.***" Well, there is no need to imagine that, for that becomes our identity also, when we are baptized into the Christian faith.

In the Living Faith 7.6.1, the confession of faith of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, we are informed that "Baptism is a sign and seal of our union with Christ and with his church. Through it we share in the death and resurrection of Christ and are commissioned to his service." In essence, when we are baptized into Christ Jesus, as our Lord and saviour, we are baptized into the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, and also into a collective identity as God's adoptive sons and daughters.

Furthermore, we are baptized into the ministry of Jesus, not of repentance though it is good to have, but of rejoicing, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near. This is not a kingdom of human initiative nor of human imagination, but a kingdom from God, of God's making, with God's creative power, signed and sealed by the coming Christ.

This is the kingdom that will overthrow early powers and principalities, as Mary sang in her Magnificat, in Luke 1:52-53, "*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.*" This is the kingdom that will usher in a new age, a new reality, as Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 43:19, "*Behold. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*" This is the kingdom of which the Scripture calls it 'the New Jerusalem', or 'the new heaven and new earth'. For behold! God is making all things new!

Nevertheless, we need to be mindful of the the two realities of the visible kingdom and the invisible kingdom. We see such a distinction in the act of baptism itself, of the visible baptism through water and the invisible baptism by the Holy Spirit. Even John himself realized such distinction, and said before the appearance of Jesus, "*The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie*

*the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

The visible kingdom we see in the Church Universal. I know, I know, Church is getting a bad rap these days, and church bashing has become a popular past time, for politicians and peoples alike. I find them in government policies, I see them in media biases, I hear them in conversations with people who do not want to have anything to do with church. Here in Canada, we could rightly conclude that Church has been relocated from the centre of power to the margin for quite some time now, and the narrative of church decline continues unabated. To be sure, there were a few bad apples in church history, and there are a few things the Church ought to, and have repented for.

But I have always maintain that Church Universal has had positive impacts on humanity over the past two thousands years. Moreover, I see being sidelined to the margin of the society as a good things. For it is at the margin of the society that Jesus had once ministered, in the forgotten corners of Galilee. It is at the margin that the Church could get back to its basic, to the core of faith, to the invisible Kingdom—the affirmation of God, the teachings of Jesus, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and minds of humankind.

Baptism opens that door, to the invisible Kingdom, to the household of God. It started with John, it was made righteous through Jesus, it continues with the Holy Spirit, it is made real through the Church Universal, and it will conclude with the final consummation of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Baptism is only but a key that opens the door. In baptism, we find ourselves first and foremost God’s beloved. You are God’s sons and daughters, the beloved of God, with you all, God is well pleased.

So, remember your baptism and give thanks to God.

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**