



You Are My Child

TEXT
Mark 1:9-13

May 12, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In the novel *The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell*, Sam Hell was born with a condition that left his eyes red. He was ashamed of his eyes. The school bullies would call him “The Boy With Devil Eyes.” He even had a teacher who belittled him in such fashion. But to Sam’s mother, he was perfect. He says it this way: “From the moment of my birth, my mother considered me normal.”

In the hospital room, when Dr. Pridemore came to conduct his examination, she asked the only question that mattered to her: “Will it affect his vision?”

“All I can say is that Samuel’s eyes are very rare.”

“Not rare, Doctor,” my mother corrected, “extraordinary.”¹ And she told Sam that over and over and over.

If you are fortunate like I am, you have a person in your life who never fails to see the extraordinary in you; a person in your life who claims you with an unflinching love. Of course like Sam Hell, for many — not for all, but for many — that person is your mother.

I don’t know what made Jesus think that this was the time, but he put down the carpentry tools, brushed the wood

shavings from his sleeves; and after listening to John the Baptist preach a strong word in the wilderness, Jesus knelt in the waters of the Jordan and was baptized. As he was coming up out of the water, he heard the voice of God and she said, *You are my child, with whom I am well pleased.*

Careful readers have noticed this is not an announcement of Jesus’ identity to the gathered crowd. God does not say, “This is my son.” No, this word is for Jesus alone. *You are my son.*

Did Jesus not know that already? Is that why God speaks to him at his baptism? Is this new information, or is God telling Jesus something he already knows? I don’t know. But I do know this: When it comes to being told we are children of God, it never hurts to hear it more than once.

If you are like me, you don’t remember your actual baptism. Presbyterians baptize babies so we often don’t remember it. My parents told me I was cranky, so my dad gave me his car keys to play with. But they talked about it like it was a big deal.

I can’t tell you how many times I have gotten a call from

a mother or father: “We need to get little Danny baptized right away because he’s getting too big to wear his baptismal gown. It’s the same gown that his daddy wore and his grandfather. We have to get him baptized before he gets too big.” It’s one of the ways we demonstrate baptism is a big deal.

I have had parents sometimes ask if they can bring the water for the baptism. I know when they are asking that they have a jar they scooped themselves or a bottle from the gift shop filled with water from the Jordan River. It’s a big deal.

I have baptized a child using a cup that was his great, great, great grandfather’s drinking cup during the Civil War. He survived the war, came home, and the preacher baptized his son with that cup. It has passed down through his family.

Whether it is a gown or a cup or special water or a family brunch, no one needs to tell us that baptism is a big deal.

I don’t know what made Jesus think this was the time, but one day he finds John in the wilderness, and he is baptized. It was a big deal, not because of a gown or even the water. It was the voice. *You are my child whom I love.*

I've never heard that voice, but I think it is still there every time we have a baptism. Baptism proclaims the truth of your identity. You are a child of God. That is the truest statement of who you are.

This is why we baptized infants. We baptize adults, too, but we are willing to baptize infants because they bring no faith; they bring no faithfulness. They contribute nothing to baptism except their need to be baptized, their need to belong. Baptism is a celebration not of the child's heart, but of the love that is in God's heart. It is a love that calls us by name and declares that we belong to God; a love that proclaims, "You are my child. You belong to me."

I know we don't have baptism every week. But we do place the font here. We place it right up front, so that every time we come into this room, we might remember that we are baptized. If we had room, I would put it right at the back of the sanctuary, so that as you entered this room you could walk past this font, dip your hand in these waters and remember that you are baptized. Because when it comes to remembering that we belong to God, it can't hurt to be told more than once.

There is an essential human need to belong.

Peter Block, in his book *The Abundant Community*, says, being part of a social group, not living alone, dramatically increases your chance to live longer. Loneliness is a factor in poor health.²

We need to belong, and when it comes to belonging to God, we need to be told over and over again.

I was talking with a mom recently and asked about her grown kids. She said, "Well, David is the oldest. He's the quiet one. You never hear from him unless he needs you to keep the kids or something. But if I need to go to the doctor, he's the one who's the most help. He stays calm.

"And there's Stephanie, the baby. She meets every day with a song. She makes me laugh every time we talk. But don't ask that girl to organize carpool, because somebody's kid is gonna get left at school."

You know the thing with moms is they know us. Sometimes they know us better than we know ourselves. My mom knows me. You folks know that my mother suffered a stroke at the age of 54. It left her disabled, and she was in our home — or at least our zip code — for the next 24 years. Several years ago, we moved her to live with my sister. At the time, my youngest brother lived in the same town.

So, I told my mother, "Mom, we are going to move you to live with my siblings."

She said, "Oh, I don't know." Now, my mother never had much of a filter, and what she had was completely removed by the stroke. She said, "I don't know."

I said, "But Mom, Martha and Jim both live there, and you like them more than you like me."

She said, "That's true, but I'll miss Carol."

I said, "Well, maybe Carol will come visit you."

"Oh, that would be perfect."

So, I called my mom yesterday, and I said, "I'm preaching on Mother's Day tomorrow. Is there anything you want me to tell them?"

She said, "Just tell them you are my son."

"OK, I will." I said, "You had lots of babies — four children — that's a lot."

She said, "Don't I know it? And you were a handful."

"Thanks, Mom, gotta go now."

So, here's the thing. Moms know us; there is no hiding who we are. And yet, if we are fortunate, they still say, "Tell them you are my son. Tell them you are my child."

The promise of baptism is that God is like that. God knows you better than you know yourself, and God will never let go of you.

Sam Hell graduated from high school and bought colored contact lenses so that his red eyes would be brown. He became an eye doctor. He went on trips like we take in the Dominican or Haiti or Kenya. He was treating children somewhere in Latin America, I can't remember where, and he met Fernando. Fernando had red eyes.

He looked at Fernando and remembered every moment of his childhood. He said, "Fernando, can I share a secret with you? It is a secret that no

one else knows. *Tus ojos son extraordinarios*,” I said.

He lowered his chin. *Muy especial*,” I continued. When Fernando retreated into his shell, I said, “You don’t believe me?”

He shook his head. *“Ellos son los ojos del Diablo.”*

“No,” I said. “They are not the devil’s eyes. You are one of God’s children. I can prove it,” I said. ... “I have been all over the world, Fernando, and I have searched for someone with eyes so extraordinary, but you are the first person I have found to be so blessed. Now are you ready for my secret?” I asked.

I walked to the sink ... and slowly removed my brown contact lenses. ... For the first time since I had started wearing contact lenses at eighteen years of age, I was ashamed of myself. ... When I returned to my chair, ... Fernando’s eyes widened.

“They used to call me the devil boy,” I said. “But you see, I am not the son of the devil, and neither are you. God gave me extraordinary eyes so that I would live an extraordinary life. And I have, Fernando. If God had not given me these eyes, I would never have met you. God did not make you different, Fernando. He made you special.”

Then he said, “All my mother’s lessons came pouring out of me.”³

If you are fortunate, you have someone in your life who loves you with a love that sees the good, that claims you —

not because of what is in your heart, but because of the love that is in theirs. And for many, that is likely to be your mother.

But whoever that person is for you, know that that person is a window into the heart of God.

For the promise of your baptism is this: You belong to God; you are God’s child whom God loves. Your baptism doesn’t make it true, but it celebrates what is always and already true: You belong to God.

When you come next week, the font will be here, and I want you to look at it and remember who you are. For when it comes to our truest identity, well, this is something it helps to be told more than once.

¹Robert Dugoni, *The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell* (2018), p. 16

²John McNight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community* (2010), p. 20

³Dugoni, pp. 382–383

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.