

**Life on the Great Adventure:  
*Beginning as Beloved***

This is a day of beginnings. It's the first Sunday after Labor Day, and so it's the beginning of Fall in the church year. We are back to three services, and the choir is in full voice at 11 o'clock. It's Rally Day--which means it's the beginning of the Sunday School year. The parents have taken the kids to their classrooms, and they've met their teachers. Our teachers have the incredible privilege and responsibility to tell them every week that God loves them.

And--need I say it--this is the first Sunday for me as your new pastor. I know...it sounds a little strange to me too. But it's been sinking in more and more all week, as little things have happened--a phone call, a card, a walk downtown, a visit. The moment it became most real was on Thursday, when Tex and Marie and me were in the front yard changing the sign. It will take a little getting used to for us all, and that is as it should be. It is, after all, only the beginning.

Since we are beginning in so many ways today, I thought I would focus this message on what the Bible teaches us about beginnings. Specifically, how we begin with God--or rather how God begins with us. And how we begin with each other, if we are willing to do it. This message is part of a series that we are beginning today, entitled *Life on the Great Adventure*. You may remember back in June, when I candidated, that I preached a message I called *The Great Adventure*. The core idea of that message was that walking with Jesus is the greatest adventure of our lives. It is not dull or boring, but it is the adventure that God has designed and destined for all of us, to walk with Jesus Christ. So for the next several weeks, we're going to dig a little deeper into what life on the great adventure with Christ is like. And like any adventure, it has a beginning.

For me, big beginnings--the opening of new chapters--can be unnerving. Bilbo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings* summed it up well when he said, "*It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to.*" There's no knowing what the adventure may bring...and that creates anxiety. This past Wednesday, I watched as little boys and girls strapped their packs to their backs, grabbed a lunch box, kissed Mom goodbye, and got on the bus. I remember doing that, but mostly I remember the feeling of doing that. I remember the feeling in the pit of my stomach that grew from questions like, "Will I have any friends? Will I like my teacher? Will I make it in this new grade?" The first day of school gets easier as time goes by, but big beginnings just keep coming. A new job, a new place, a new phase of life--with new hopes and dreams for the future.

In the midst of all the uncertainties in every big beginning, there is one thing that is certain, and it is the core idea of this message: Before we have said or done anything, God loves us as one of his very own children. Before we have said or done anything--written a paper, finished a project, preached a sermon--God loves us as one of his very own children.

If I had to boil down the whole good news of our faith into one statement, it would probably be this one. God loves you as you are--as the old hymn says, "without one plea." God's love is a free gift. It comes to us from the beginning. With God, love is given--not earned. When John was writing his first letter to the churches, he put it like this: *"In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."* God sent his son to die for us, to save us, before we did anything for God. God has loved us from the very beginning.

Perhaps the closest thing we can know of this kind of love is the love a parent has for a child. From the moment you first learn that you're expecting, you begin to love that child. And your love grows and deepens, and all the while the child has done nothing--accomplished nothing, performed nothing, said nothing. And yet, you love. The love a parent has for a child is a love that is a freely given love, from the beginning.

Look with me closely at Jesus' baptism as the evangelist Mark records it. Because the way that God the Father loves his Son Jesus Christ, reveals to us how God loves us. I'll read it again for you: *"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

As most of us learn at Christmas that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. But he actually grew up in Nazareth. Growing up in Nazareth is kind of like growing up in the proverbial Timbuktu. In Jesus day, Nazareth was a backwater little town. In fact, it is never mentioned anywhere in any ancient writing until Jesus is grown up there, with a carpenter named Joseph and his wife Mary. Now Nazareth was in a region called Galilee, and it was the area surrounding the Eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. So this is where Jesus grew up. And when he was around thirty years old, he left this little quiet town, not too far from the big lake, and when to see John in the wilderness. He went to John to be baptized.

Now, you might ask why Jesus was baptized? Jesus had never sinned, and so he did not need to come to John for the baptism of repentance and forgiveness. But he did it because it was a symbolic way of marking the beginning of his ministry. More than that it was a way of identifying with us--right from the beginning--with *our* need for repentance and forgiveness .

One of the most amazing things about life here at Frenchtown over the last year is the unbelievable number of baptisms--infants, young people, adults. Each of these baptisms symbol-

izes the beginning of a life with Christ, and it symbolizes our need for God's forgiveness throughout our lives. Jesus was baptized to begin his ministry here on earth, and we are baptized when we begin our great adventure with him.

Now, after Jesus was baptized, when he was coming up out of the water, he saw that the heavens were torn apart--and the Spirit of God came and rested on him like a dove. And in that moment he heard a voice that said, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well-pleased." Now, here was Jesus fresh from Nazareth, just at the beginning of his ministry. He had not done anything but grow up in a hard-scrabble town, and come to John for baptism. There were no accomplishments; no miracles performed, no great teaching, no suffering, no death. This was only the beginning. Yet here at the beginning, God the Father says to his Son--you are my beloved, with you I am well-pleased."

Can you see in your mind a father, reaching into a crib, and taking his baby in his arms. He holds the little one close, and whispers--with a broad smile across his face--you are my child, and I love you with all my heart. That's what God says to Christ at his baptism. The heavens tear open, as if God is smiling, and the Spirit descends, and God says, "You are mine, and I love you."

The way that God loves Christ here, shows us how God loves us--because God treats us like Christ. When we are baptized, we are baptized "into Christ." The writers of scripture use a variety of ways to describe this reality of being a part of Christ: we are put into Christ's body; we are clothed with Christ; we are hidden in Christ. But here is what it all means: that when God looks at us, he sees us just like he sees Christ. He sees us as a beloved child in whom he is well pleased. God sees us and loves us from the very beginning.

I think again of the children who started school. How did they do that? Walk into the first day of school? What inner resources gave them that courage--to start a new adventure in a new grade? I think they could do it because they are beloved, because someone loves them and takes great joy in them. Someone stood at the door and said "I love you," "I'll see you when you come home."

God loves us from the very beginning, that is the love that sends us into the great adventure he has for us. There is no more sure footing on which to begin; no better starting place for our adventures, than to be loved and treasured by God. For God is the one who created us, and the one who will finally welcome us home.

Finally, the way that God loves us in Christ--from the beginning--shows us how we can love others. The way that God loves us, show us how we can love others. When Jesus had finished the last supper with his disciples, and was about to go to the cross, he said, "*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*" Christ's love for us is the pattern of our love for each other. In his letter, the Apostle John writes, "*Beloved, since God loved*

*us so much, we ought also to love one another.”* The way God has loved us teaches us how to love each other. We respond to God’s love not only by loving God back, but also by loving others. God loves us from the beginning, so we love others from the beginning.

Caitlin and I have experienced this kind of love over this past week . You as a congregation have shown us so much love--through phone calls, and cards, help moving, furniture, food. And it has all come at the beginning. I am thinking especially of the work that was done on the manse. Just looking over the list of names nearly brought me to tears. Some of you were there nearly every day, all day. You were scraping, sanding, pulling, pushing, painting, framing, cutting. Others who could not be there to help gave money to buy the supplies. And the result is amazing. A complete overhaul in two weeks--and it looks beautiful. We are so happy.

You’ve expressed so much love to us--and we just arrived! We’ve just begun this journey with you. Already, we are living our great adventure--beginning as beloved.

This is how we should always begin--as beloved. It is how Christ began at his baptism. It is how God begins with us, when he looks at us as one of his beloved children. It is how we can begin with each other, when we love one another as God has loved us.

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