

Sermon Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Baptism of the Lord

January 12th, 2025

Today I want to talk about a favorite short film of mine, which actually won a couple of awards back in the day. This short film is called 'Validation'. Has anyone ever come across it? I strongly recommend you watch it, I think it's very uplifting – and makes you think! You can find it on You Tube. Here is the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cbk980jV7Ao&t=102s>

But a little bit about this short film. We first see a typical public parking garage, with a sign, '2 hours of free parking with validation'. Then we see a sad and tired looking man approaching the parking garage attendant with his parking ticket in hand. He hands it to the attendant and says, 'I am here to get validated.'

At that, the parking attendant, a young guy named Hugh Newman, lights up and says, 'You – you are awesome! You got a great face. You have powerful features. Has anyone ever told you that?' To which the man replies, kind of taken aback, 'Um, no.' The conversation continues, during which the sad looking man is encouraged by Hugh. Slowly, his demeanor changes. You see the pleasant surprise on his face, and he even starts smiling. There's someone who believes in him! Those kind words of validation make the man's day.

Then there is a montage of different people coming to get their parking tickets validated – and getting much more than they expected: kind words and encouragement by this parking attendant. They are transformed by this simple act of caring.

Word about Hugh Newman spreads, and soon people park in that particular garage just to experience validation. You see long lines of people waiting for Hugh to validate their parking ticket – and to be validated. But as they are waiting, there is chatter and laughter, there is connection – Hugh's kindness fosters community.

This catches the attention of management. And the manager of course complains that folks just come, not to do business, but to hear a kind word from Hugh. So the boss sends some tough security guards to tell Hugh to stop validating people –

after all, this is a business, and not a social club. But guess what happens: Hugh starts validating those security guards, 'Gosh, you have a hard job, I wouldn't want to do it. I am sure you often feel underappreciated...'

So the guys who were sent to prevent Hugh from doing what he is doing are transformed. They take him to their boss, who in turn is transformed by Hugh's validation, and eventually Hugh is sent to the highest political instances to validate **them**. The world is transformed through Hugh. A TV news show even does a special on him: 'Hugh Newman – the man who changes the world by providing free parking - and free compliments.'

The story then takes another turn, but I don't want to get into that right now.

What I really like about this story is that it shows you that it doesn't take much to make someone's day. We all like it when we are appreciated, when we are validated. We all have something to offer. We all are worth something. And it's good to be reminded of that once in a while. Because we experience a lot of criticism and negativity. Sometimes we may not believe ourselves that we have something special to offer; we may not believe that we are worthy. We have self-doubts. Am I enough? And, just as a side note, as women we tend to experience this even more strongly than men.

What struck me about the Bible lessons for today is that we hear beautiful words of encouragement and validation from God. In the Book of Isaiah, God speaks tenderly to the people of Israel, 'Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name – you are mine!'

And we hear words of validation and affirmation coming from the open heavens as Jesus is baptized: 'You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.' It seems that even Jesus needs to hear these words as he is baptized, as he is about to change his life and embark on a way that eventually will take him to the cross.

Now baptism has been an important element of Christian faith and identity since the beginning. Baptism marks a new beginning, a new life in God. In the olden days, when adult baptism was the norm, the beginning of a new life in Christ was often signified by giving the newly baptized a new name. We still see that custom when someone enters a monastery or a convent, or when a new pope is elected.

At the same time, baptism is a validation and an encouragement. In baptism, you and I and all the baptized are given the promise that we belong to God, and that nobody and nothing can ever change that. In baptism, God declares us God's beloved and endlessly precious children. Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name – you are mine.

This promise, this encouragement, this validation has the power to transform us, and to transform our lives – just as the lives of those coming to fictional parking attendant Hugh Newman for validation are transformed. And this change hopefully is reflected in how we live our lives – with faith, hope and love. And in turn our words and action have the power to transform others.

But we also know that we don't always feel confident – in God's validation, and our abilities. I don't know about you, but I have plenty of days when I feel down, when I am discouraged, even hopeless, when I let some criticism really get to me, when I can't forgive myself for a stupid mistake I made. There are days when I think that I am somehow not enough, that I am not worthy. There are days when I forget the promises God made on the day I was baptized – that I am God's, that I am redeemed, and that nothing can ever separate me from the love of God. Do you sometimes feel that way, too?

I think it's important that we are reminded of our baptism once in a while – as we were reminded of our baptism a few minutes ago by the sprinkling with water from the baptismal fountain. It is important that we are reminded of God's promises, of God's validation. We need to hear words of encouragement in a world that more often than not is hard on people, hard on us – a world that seems to get meaner by the day. We need to be reminded that we are embraced by God's love and grace. That we are precious in God's sight, no matter, what others might tell us – or what we ourselves might tell us.

I think it's also important that we are reminded that all the baptized (and even those who aren't) are God's beloved and precious children. Like the homeless, the stranger, the refugee. Those we don't agree with. Those who look different, those who think differently, who live differently. Those who don't seem to have anything in common with us. **They** are God's, redeemed and called by name. They are brothers, sisters, siblings, entrusted to our care.

In baptism, we and all are precious in God's eyes, always. We and all are validated. My prayer is that this validation lifts us up, transforms us, and gives us the courage to live fully into our baptismal promises. Amen