

Sermon for 1 Epiphany (Year C)

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*The Rev. David “Chip” Robinson
Preached at Belleville Congregational Church,
Newburyport, MA*

A colleague tells a story, probably apocryphal, of a father who sat in church with his three young children as a tiny infant was being baptized. As the pastor poured water over the infant’s head, the five-year-old in the family took on a quizzical look, and in a loud voice asked his father, “Daddy, why is he *brainwashing* that baby?”

When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, it was a decisive moment. Jesus had been called into a life of public ministry — and this was his way of saying “yes” to all that God was calling him to be and to do. God used this event to confirm *who* Jesus was and to accept *from* Jesus a commitment, a dedication, an understanding. It was the moment, most scholars believe, when Jesus finally understood what it was going to mean to be the Son of God. It was what he experienced at his baptism that would allow him to say later, in essence, “I know where I have come from and where I am going.”

Brainwashing may be too harsh a word, but in a sense, that is what happens at our baptism. We wash away all the things that keep us from claiming our belovedness as sons or daughters of God, and we become cleansed so we can accept the *challenge* and the *call* of being ones in whom God is well pleased. Though none of us will likely hear the voice of God speak as definitively as God spoke at the baptism of Jesus, it’s important for us to affirm what this moment is all about: Think back to the day you were baptized, and consider the fact that God spoke to you, as he spoke to Jesus: “You are my beloved child.”

There’s an old saying that says the two most important days in a person’s life are the day they are born and the day they discover *why* they were born. For many of us, that realization begins at our baptism. As the ancient church theologian, Tertullian, put it, “Christians are *made*, not *born*.” It takes a *lot* to make someone a Christian — and, in this world, a lot to *keep* them Christian. But first, they must know *who they are*: a *child* of God and a beloved member of the *people* of God. Baptism is our way of reminding ourselves that every child is the child of God. What a difference it would make if we could just keep that insight clearly before us in each moment of our life together as a

Christian community. If we knew who we were, wouldn't it make a difference as to how we lived?

A preacher once told a story of a king who came to a shabby little town to announce that he had secretly exchanged his child for one of the town's babies. Everyone, of course, wondered which child it was. All were worried because they did not want to rear the baby of the king and have him return one day to find his child neglected, unhealthy, uneducated, or less than perfect. So each of them did everything possible to ensure that the children in their household were given the best of everything. Care, love, education, the works — every child was treated as if he or she were the king's child. One day, many years later, the king returned. By now, the whole town was different from what it had been the day he came all those years ago. The once-shabby schools gleamed. The hospital, the playgrounds, the churches all thrived and offered the citizens of that town the very best they had to offer. Finally one of the mothers approached him and asked, "I know my daughter is the princess. She is, isn't she?" To that the king replied, "No. It is every one of them."

As I look upon this congregation today, I want to say to each and every one of you, "You are a child of the king. You were created in the image of God. You are God's beloved son, God's beloved daughter, and in you God is well pleased."

Many years ago, when I was in along about the third grade, I remember having a teacher who categorized her pupils according to their reading abilities. Some of them she called "buses," some were "trains," and some were "planes." The best readers, and I was fortunate to be one of them, were the "planes." The slowest readers were the "buses." Everyone in between was a "train." I never thought about it at the time, but I have to wonder now, how many of those young "buses" were able to lose that label and succeed? So many of us have to *work* at knowing ourselves, accepting ourselves, being ourselves.

Who tells you who you are? Who held up a mirror in front of you and said, in effect, "That's you?" We turn to all sorts of experts to help identify us: handwriting analysts, genealogists, therapists, those who administer personality typing inventories. Advertisers want to tell us who we are. Shouldn't we pick up a clue as to who we *really* are right here — in church? Shouldn't we allow *God* and *God's* people to help us discover who we are? A psychiatrist, whose name I now forget, once said, "You behave the way you look at yourself." It was God's idea from the very beginning that we should look upon ourselves

as beloved children of the most high God. Look in the mirror. That's who you are by baptism today.

Let me close with one last story, one I used to tell in our confirmation class each year. It's a fable of a young lion cub whose mother is killed shortly after giving birth. The cub, alone and abandoned, is spotted by a herd of goats passing by, and they invite him to join them. The goats adopt and raise the cub as one of their own. They taught him to be — a goat. He ate grass like a goat, he bleated like a goat. He *was*, to his own way of thinking, a goat. One day, a great king lion happened by the herd and let out a mighty roar. The goats all fled in fear — but not the cub. The young cub just stood there, not fearful at all. The great lion came up to him and asked why he was masquerading as a goat. The young cub pawed the ground and bleated — and then the king led him to a pool of water. The two of them looked and saw their reflections. And in that moment the young cub saw who he really was.

Today, you and I are being led to the water. And, today, we will see who we really are. You're not just a child of human parents, admirable and loving though those parents be. You are a child of the king. The child of God. Your identity is far greater and far deeper than you will ever know apart from coming to walk with and follow and learn from that King. And so, today, you and I, children of the King, are invited to walk together and discover our shared, wonderful identity. "You, good friend, are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter. With you I am well pleased."