

“I Love You, and I’m Proud of You”

- I. Introduction: In today’s Gospel Jesus asked his disciples to tell him who they thought he was. They responded by telling him what other people were saying about Jesus. It’s often easier to answer a tough question by focusing upon what others think. But this did not satisfy Jesus. It never does. “Who do you think that I am?” he asked. This is one of the core questions that each of us as followers of Christ always has to answer. “Who do we think Jesus Christ is?”

Let’s consider this exchange from the other side. How much courage it must have taken for Jesus to ask this question so openly and directly. He knew that his closest followers understood him in a very limited way. In many ways Jesus was quite alone in his mission. Where did his self-knowledge and his clarity about his ministry originate? Where did it come from? I believe that Jesus’ clarity and endurance came from God his Father. Jesus was energized by his father’s blessing. We can see that in the third chapter of Luke where Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove as he came up out of the water and a voice came in from heaven: “You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.” Another way of saying this would be “I love you and I’m proud of you.” This blessing from his father got him started in his ministry, carried him through many tough days, and propelled him to the Resurrection.

- II. “I Love You and I’m Proud of You.” Have you ever said that to one of your children? Or has a parent ever said that to you? “I love you and I’m proud of you.” One of my really important discoveries as a parent was that there were important times when what my children needed from me was a blessing, not a blueprint; a clear, concrete statement of how much I respected and loved them, rather than a set of directions about how they could succeed. “I love you, and I’m proud of you.”

Let me give you a tangible example of how I learned the importance of a parent’s blessing. Our son Jeremy is a bright guy (how many parents would not say that!). But in high school he seemed to be setting his own priorities, and they didn’t always seem smart to me. In subjects he loved and with teachers who excited him about learning, his performance was off the chart. In subjects where he was not as motivated, with more limited effort he did not do as well. As an educator, I knew that a

high GPA was needed to open the doors of top colleges and certainly was needed to make him competitive for scholarships. French was one of the classes where Jeremy did not experience excitement and therefore did less well than I would have hoped. So I pushed; I set up early morning meetings with Jeremy and his French teacher and offered to help him in French. How ridiculous that was!

This was during a period of real learning and growth in my life, and, with the help of several wise others, I began to question my motivation and my methods. Part way through Jeremy's junior year in high school I had an epiphany. As you know, that's an experience where the lights come on! It was Jeremy's life, not mine, and ultimately his decisions about the future were his to make. So I remember going into his room one night and saying, "Jeremy, I've finally gotten it. All this pushing about grades and schools and scholarships has not been right. It is your life, and you know the realities of college admission as well as or even better than I do. So I'm going to get off your back. I'm going to help you do what you want to do, but you're in charge of where you go. Jeremy, I love you and I'm proud of you. Go for it in your way."

The end to that chapter of the story is that Jeremy discovered a two-year college called Deep Springs in the mountains of California near the Nevada state line that accepted 12 students a year. It was a working ranch, and each student was assigned a major job and a number of minor ones. Jeremy learned about carpentry and cooking for a large group of people; he learned anatomy from caring for animals. Two years later, he went to Brown with cowboys boots on! I must admit that sometimes, I had to keep myself in line, because it was clear to me what he was doing right and what he was doing wrong. But I worked at remembering the lesson I had learned. After graduating from Brown, still unsure about his long-term plans, he went to Thailand for a year to do AIDS education. When he finally became clear about what profession he wanted to enter, he went to Emory med school on a Coca-Cola scholarship. One of the oldest guys in his med school class. And, ironically, while in med school, he actually learned French in order to do public health work in Rwanda. But by then, it was his blueprint he was following. My job was and continues to be the blessing. How many times I've said to him, "I love you, and I'm very proud of you."

- III. God the Father. In Luke III, that is exactly what God was saying to Jesus at the time of His baptism. You are "my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." The Message translation is "This is my son . . . marked by my love [and the] delight of my life." Why do you think God might have given this blessing at that exact time? I believe He did so because Jesus was taking his first great risk . . . he was making his initial step into public ministry. He was acting on his call by asking to be baptized, even though he didn't need to be. He had no sins to wash away. But He did want to

demonstrate how vitally important it is to be baptized. For Jesus, and for all Christians since, the sacrament of baptism is a time when God's Holy Spirit descends upon us. And Jesus would need the power and encouragement of the Holy Spirit during His 40-day temptation in the desert and throughout his public ministry. God blessed Jesus when He took the step of baptism and unmistakably told Him so: "I love you and I am proud of you."

- IV. Our Relationship with God: Brothers and sisters, it's God's very deep desire to bless all of us. It is up to us to reach out for and to accept these blessings. One of the ways we do this is to follow God's call into ministry, step by step, day by day, as that call becomes increasingly clear to us.

Joseph Campbell said that our call becomes more clear when we "follow our bliss," acting on what it is that brings us joy. Others have said that we come to understand our ministries by figuring out where our passions meet the deep needs of the world. All answers to the question "What ministry am I being called to?" seem to include a process of becoming clear about who we are and what we are passionate about and taking steps to act on what we have discovered.

- V. Conclusion: Blessing One Another. My hope for you, for me, and for us together is that we will help one another to learn about our ministries and that we will then together act on what we are learning. These past several weeks at Ascension we have experienced a number of examples of shared ministry coming alive. We had a phenomenal Vacation Bible School with approximately 80 children in attendance, over 50 volunteers and a wonderful sense of the Holy Spirit driving the week along. We also had a Wednesday night Evensong with a Contemporary Music group where this new group played together for the first time and were absolutely wonderful. The week before we had an office volunteer luncheon with over 20 volunteers in attendance. What we are experiencing is that shared ministry is very exiting. This morning we blessed by Aiden Howard's baptism as we are being blessed by Caroline and Chris' presence with us in this parish.

There is a closing sentence sometimes used by lectors in the Episcopal worship service. Instead of saying "The Word of the Lord" the lector says "Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church." What I hear the Spirit saying to us at the church of the Ascension is "I love you and I'm proud of you." Let us not only hear, but be the voice of God to one another today. Go out of your way before you leave here today to tell someone how much you appreciate what they do and how much you love them. Together, let's multiply the blessing. Amen.