

Beloved, Be Loving  
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Matthew 3:13-17

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

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He heard the voice of God, at his kitchen table, late one night.

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., was 27 years old, in his second year as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, and he was helping to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It was 1956 when he heard the voice of God (perhaps it was not the only time).

He had heard some unusual voices that season - some terrible human voices, calling his home to threaten him and his family. That night, the phone rang again. A hateful voice told him to take his family and leave town, or else.

He told what came next in his 1958 book *Stride Toward Freedom*:

"I was ready to give up...In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. 'I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.'

"At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of

an inner voice saying: ‘*Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.*’ Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.”

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Jesus heard God’s voice, in the middle of a muddy river, in the clear of the day.

Jesus was about 30 years old and beginning his ministry when he - and the people around him - heard the voice of God. He’d come to his cousin, in the Jordan river.

To fulfill all righteousness,  
or to declare that he, too, was ready to work for the kingdom of heaven.<sup>1</sup>

John pushed him under the surface and Jesus rose up out of the water,

And a dove -

The Spirit of God -  
came down from heaven  
and they all heard God’s voice.

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

This is my child, God offered: the one whom I am sending into the world to proclaim justice.

This is the beloved, God offered: one who is precious and loved.

*The beloved.*

In the Greek it’s *agapetos*. *Agapetos*, from *agape*. We know *agape*. *Agape* is “unconditional love born by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> *Agape* was an obscure word that Greek speakers in the ancient near east didn’t use very often - until followers of the way of Jesus lifted it up. To practice *agape* is not just to be in love; to practice *agape* is not just to be friends or family. To practice *agape* is to practice self-giving love that wants the wellbeing of others. *Agape* love is other-focused and self-giving. *Agape* love is neighbor love. *Agape* love aims us toward the kingdom of God. Kim Joo-Han says that *agape* love is “mutual love in relationship,” a Christian norm of justice.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This idea comes from Michael Rinehart’s Christian Century commentary on Matthew 3:13-17, January 2023.

<sup>2</sup> [https://img.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/article\\_pdf.php?aid=33605](https://img.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/article_pdf.php?aid=33605)

<sup>3</sup> “Toward Mutual Love in Relationship: A Study of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Concept of *Agape* as Self-Sacrifice” by Kim Joo-Han, 2008

God called Jesus *the agapetos* and let me suggest God wasn't just saying, the one I treasure, my precious or my favorite.<sup>4</sup> God was not just saying, I'm so proud of you honey. God was saying: this one, my son whom I have sent to the world, is *agapetos* - one that I love, and one that will love the way I love, one that will practice agape love, one that will teach you to practice agape love.

That's the word play that I'm working on here -

That Jesus, God's beloved child, God with us, was sent to be love.

That Jesus, God's agapetos, came to love us unconditionally, and to teach us how to practice agape love.

Jesus rose up out of the water,  
The Spirit of God -  
Came down from heaven  
And they all heard God's voice.

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus heard God's voice, saying you are beloved - my child, whom I love - and you are beloved - capable of loving the way I love - and you are beloved - ready to teach the people how to love with mercy and compassion and grace.

What a gift Jesus was given, in that river.

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Dr. King received a similar gift - the assurance that God was with him in his ministry, and he could do the work of love and justice to which he was called:

*'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.'*

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When Paul sent out his letters to all the little churches he guided, he called them beloved. Agapetos. You who are loved, you are able to practice love the way Jesus did: with mercy and compassion and grace. Beloved, be loving.

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<sup>4</sup> (though some translators say "favored")

And when the writer of 1 John addressed Christians, they gave them the same name: Beloved, Agapetos. We agape love because God agape loves, and God is agape love.

Dr. King spoke of the power of *this kind of love* in his Nobel acceptance<sup>5</sup>:

This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men....When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response which is little more than emotional bosh. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the First Epistle of Saint John:

Let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.  
He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.  
If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected in us.

Dr. King considered love something very powerful, indeed.

Agape love, in other words, is a force that can turn back hate; a power that can overcome racism, a foundation on which to build a God's kingdom here on earth.

When a voice comes through the clouds - or when the pastor sprinkles water on your forehead and calls you beloved - it's more than sentiment. It's more than a pat on the back or a complement. It's a call and a promise. Beloved, be loving.

We're told we're loved by a self-giving and compassionate God, that we can be agapetos: ones who are beloved and ones who love; ones who are loved by God and ones who are called to love by one who is love.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email)

We are called to love  
To be loving  
To practice agape love

And when we say it on Sunday morning...

*Pilgrims on this journey:  
You are beloved*

It's not just a welcome -  
It's a calling.

Beloved, be loving.

Amen.

Benediction: Beloved, Be Loving .