

Blessed be *God* who animates our lives and welcomes us by our baptism into a community of belovedness and lovingness which is also so very beautiful. Amen

It is almost impossible for me to think about baptism and its meaning without recalling a story told by Jan Richardson. She, in turn, learned of it through a pastor of a United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. This was described as a "wildly" diverse congregation which included "people with power and PhDs and folks who have never gone past the third grade; folks with two houses and folks living on the streets; and...those of us who are crazy and those of us who think we are not"!

In the midst of this blessed diversity was a woman named Fayette. She struggled with mental illness and lupus and homelessness. In the new member class which she joined she was struck with the pastor's description of baptism: "this holy moment when we are named by *God's* grace with such power it won't come undone" This blessed assurance grabbed Fayette's imagination and she would ask again and again "And when I am baptized, what am I? "

The class responded again and again with these words: "Beloved, precious child of *God*, and beautiful to behold" She was thus reassured again and again...

The day for her baptism came and after full immersion Fayette came up spluttering; "What am I now?"
all responded "Beloved precious child of *God* and beautiful to behold"

And she danced...

A mere two months later the pastor received a phone call:

Fayette had been beaten and raped. when the pastor arrived she was pacing back and forth chanting "I am beloved...I am beloved...I am beloved"

She looked up locked eyes with her pastor took a deep breath and said "I am beloved, precious child of God and...'

then she caught sight of herself in the mirror a sight of blood and tears and torn clothes and filth, basically she was askew after a brief pause she continued "I am beloved, precious child of God and..." looking back at the image and taking a deep breath "and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I'll be so beautiful i'll take your breath away!"

She, just like you and I and Jesus, had been named beloved

She just like you and I and Jesus can claim that name

It is a name and a blessing bestowed like no other...which never never gets undone.

Fayette in her brokenness and her marginalization was just like those vulnerable souls whom Jesus met and baptized and healed and welcomed into the household of God

This power in the sacrament of water, not to mention the Holy Spirit, is like no other power in its ability to reach out, embrace, welcome heal and include.

It is a beloved thing this belonging to the Body of Christ

It is a blessed truth to believe in the power of the Holy Spirit

And It is also so so beautiful.

The waters of baptism, poured over us literally and figuratively, everyday, all the time, seep into our pores and like radioactive isotopes attach themselves to all the cells of our goodness and belovedness and

make them radiant in God's sight; the waters of baptism also assuage and heal the broken cells. God's power of creation and redemption are present and active in baptism and beyond.

When I preach about baptism, when I baptize, when I recall the meaning of baptism, I link several words which begin with the letter B: belonging, loving and believing. After the Fayette story I also think now of Beauty.

Imagine the rejection, the shame, the feelings of worthlessness that might occupy someone like Fayette; imagine those feelings which we too, often experience. In baptism a voice, a presence, appears in our lives and whispers **You are my beloved in you I am well pleased**. I think of this voice, experience this voice everytime I find myself sinking into self doubt or despair.

In baptism we are offered eternal membership in a community to which we belong. All of us long to belong. When we realize that total acceptance and embrace, we realize the very truth of our existence in Christ. Nothing else really matters. As the hymn suggests; the strife is over.

In baptism, in our covenant we also recite and hopefully cherish the profession of our faith. We not only recite our beliefs in the Trinitarian God but we also profess our promises to live as Christians, to respect the dignity of every creature. Believing creates response; it sustains our character. It is pleasing to God.

And then there is that dignity...the opposite of shame...which to me speaks of the beauty which may be known in baptism. The beauty of each and every human being, not to mention every aspect of God's good creation.

God's beauty, the beauty of holiness in which we worship, transcends or ignores the perfection we often strive for. God' beauty inhabits without discrimination.

'The beauty of the true ideal is its hospitality towards woundedness, weakness, failure and fall-back. Yet so many people are infected with the virus of perfection. They cannot rest; they allow themselves no ease until they come close to the cleansed domain of perfection. This false notion of perfection does damage and puts their lives under great strain. It is a wonderful day in a life when one is finally able to stand before the long, deep mirror of one's own reflection and view oneself with appreciation, acceptance, and forgiveness. On that day one breaks through the falsity of images and expectations which have blinded one's spirit. One can only learn to see who one is when one learns to view oneself with the most intimate and forgiving compassion." (John O'Donohue)

And so we return to Fayette and her seemingly damaged image in the mirror. Baptism and all its blessings and promises assure her and all of us who and whose we are.

Fayette's was a simple phrase which sustained her hope in Beauty and belonging, worth and welcome. I invite you to look in the mirror and

repeat her mantra: Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold"

This was the answer to her question: What am I? which we might know as the often asked question: Who Am I?

Through Baptism Another B word might emerge: Becoming... You are Becoming the beloved child of God who you were created to be!

So today we are going to reclaim and renew our baptismal vows. We do so with the understanding there is no re baptism; there is only re membering...re membering...