

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on January 10, 2010 (Baptism of Jesus, Year C)

Everyone likes affirmation. It feels good. When someone tells you you've done a good job, it validates your effort. It's a stamp of approval. And it beats the alternative. We much prefer accolades to criticism; we like people to build us up rather than tear us down; we'd rather receive an acceptance letter than a rejection notice. It's a pretty natural phenomenon – the human ego is a fragile thing. And affirmation helps pave over our innate insecurities.

This morning we hear the story of Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan and what happens immediately after the pouring on of water, is divine affirmation. The Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove and we hear the voice from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." God the Father affirms his only Son; God reassures Jesus that his call is authentic and literally washes away any doubt that may have lingered. Divine affirmation doesn't translate into an easy life. Jesus was affirmed by God and then immediately driven out into the wilderness to be tested by satan. But it was precisely this affirmation from God that empowered him to withstand temptation and begin his public ministry. A ministry fraught with rejection and ultimately crucifixion.

Jesus' humanity may well have needed such affirmation from God. It allowed him to live into his calling and gave him the confidence to move boldly ahead with his ministry. Not that Jesus needed affirmation in the Power of Positive Thinking way. He's not looking in the mirror each morning and doing self-esteem exercises; "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it people like me."

Divine affirmation has little in common with the overdone affirmation we sometimes encounter. "Have I mentioned what a fantastic job you're doing listening to this sermon? You are by far the greatest congregation ever assembled."

There's a whole New Age/self-help cottage industry built upon people's insecurities and their need for affirmation. All you have to do is check out the "Self Improvement" section at your local book store. And self-affirmation as a spiritual path is alive, well and thriving in the "Spirituality" section. Can you tell I wrote this sermon in the café at Barnes & Noble? But the point is that divine affirmation transcends "feel good" spirituality.

Which is important to remember when the words "Affirm me!" become a societal mantra. We wouldn't want to hurt anybody's feelings or suggest that what they're doing somehow falls short. So as a society we tend to be long on affirmation and short on criticism. Check out all the "participation" trophies kids accumulate these days. You'll see boatloads of them on bedroom shelves and, eventually, at the swap area at the town dump. It all feeds into the attitude of 'You affirm me, I'll affirm you, and we'll all feel good.' Which feels good but, of course, lacks any depth. As the football playoffs kick-off this weekend I'll call this the Anti-Lombardi model of

spirituality. (And I realize *my* Ravens are playing *your* Patriots at 1:00 pm – I considered wearing purple this morning). But you can't really picture Vince Lombardi calling over a receiver who just dropped a pass and giving him a big hug. It's just not happening.

So Divine affirmation is different. And in some ways I see the affirmation of Jesus' identity as the beloved Son of God as a pastoral moment between Father and Son. There's a sensitivity here; one that would replay itself on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured just before heading into Jerusalem to be crucified. Again, the voice comes from heaven: "'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'" So it's no accident that we have this divine affirmation both at the start of Jesus' public ministry and at its conclusion.

It's true that we all crave positive affirmation. Children seek affirmation from their parents – and I'm not just speaking about *young* children. We crave affirmation at work and we want it at home. Though if you have kids I don't recommend relying on them to maintain a positive self-image. I was told just the other day that not only am I the "worst dad ever" but I'm also "fat."

I've enjoyed the affirmation of my ministry since I've been here at St. John's. The favorable reviews from parishioners, the positive buzz in the community. It not only feels good and reflects well upon St. John's but it also affirms my decision in accepting the call to this parish. And I plan to ride this honeymoon for all it's worth. But I also look forward to the day it's over. Because a honeymoon is simply a relationship that lacks the depth that only comes with time. In a pastoral relationship it means going through the liturgical year over and over again. It means being with people through times of celebration and joy as well as pain and grief. It means having disagreements but finding ways to work them out; it means recognizing that as human beings we're all broken and in need of reconciliation and healing. It means recognizing that your rector is human. But it's also the recognition that it is the love of God in Christ that binds us together and makes us whole.

But ultimately the only affirmation that matters comes from God. Human affirmation is nice; divine affirmation is transformative. It gives us an identity as children of God that transcends any career path or organizational affiliation or even family ties. God affirms you simply because you exist not because of anything you've done or achieved.

And that's pretty amazing when you think about it. Human affirmation is all linked to performance or status. We cheer for the football player who scores the winning touchdown. We give a standing ovation to the diva who nails an aria. But God affirms you because you are made in the image of God. That's it. It's not linked to job performance or anything that you do or say.

None of this is to say that we shouldn't offer words of encouragement or affirmation to one another. It's the stuff of human relationship and it's important. But it's just a matter of keeping the affirmation in perspective. Affirmation in this world is nice but it's not essential to our true identity. That's best left to the God of true affirmation and love.