Earlier this week, I stopped at the Floyd Express to grab a few things before picking Billy up from work. As I was walking around the store, I noticed that quite a few people were coming in the door, going straight to the check-out counter, handing the cashiers money, then leaving. When I had finished shopping, I approached the counter and found myself immersed in a sea of people, all coming to the clerks with money in their hands. Is it always this busy? I asked the woman who rang me up. She nodded her head. I heard the man next to me ask for a Powerball ticket, then I remembered seeing a headline about the Powerball winning amount being close to $600 million. Aha! That was the reason for the flurry of activity at the Express. The Powerball drawing was that evening and last minute buyers were purchasing their chance at changing their lives forever. Full disclosure here – though Billy and I usually only buy the scratch-off tickets to put in one another's Christmas stockings, we did buy three Powerball tickets that night, so swept up were we in the excitement of the huge jackpot. I know my chances of winning the Powerball are miniscule. In fact, I read an article that said a person's chances of winning a Powerball drawing are less than these things happening: having an IQ of 190 or greater, being killed by an asteroid strike, being killed by a lightning strike, dying by drowning, or being struck by lightning while drowning.

But someone has to win it eventually, right? And why can't that person be me? That's the question millions of people ask every week as they hand their money over and dream of what could be. They fantasize about how life would be if they didn't have to work, if they could pay off all our debts, buy their dream home wherever they want to live, help their families, travel the world on a whim, drive luxury cars, endow their favorite charities or schools. All of their worries would vanish and they could live as happy, content, generous citizens of this great planet. I have those kinds of daydreams sometimes, wondering what I would do if a huge amount of money suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Though part of me would like to say that nothing would change, that my life would look just the same as it does now, at least on the outside, I know that's not true.

Lotteries and daydreams tap into a kind of wistfulness many of us have. We wonder what life would be like if we won the big one. We look back on our lives and question the decisions we have made along the way, imagining what life would look like if we'd chosen other roads to follow. Would we be happier, wealthier, healthier, more loved, less haunted by doubt? What would life be like if things had turned out differently, if we had become different people than we are now? Would our relationship with God be different if we were more successful, less stressed, kinder, more faithful in our churchlife?

Luke helps answer that question today. Many people had followed John, had come out to listen to him when he visited their villages. He spoke of the Messiah, the one they and their ancestors had waited for for so long. John talked about the Messiah as if he was right down the road, as if they might one day meet him the way they had met John. Some people were confused and thought John was the long-expected one, but Luke took care to place John in prison at the time of Jesus' baptism for Luke wanted there to be no question about who went under the waters of the river that day. It was Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, who came to the river to be baptized. But this last baptism was nothing like the others that happened that day. As soon as Jesus came up out of the water, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus. A voice came straight out of heaven: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” This voice was like no other; as the psalmist wrote, it thundered over the waters, full of power and majesty. It was powerful enough to break cedar trees and flashed with flames of fire. The voice of God was able to make oak trees whirl and strip forests bare. This powerful, majestic voice declared Jesus to be God's Son. This voice of God beamed with pride as God pronounced his pleasure with his Son.

Listen to this. Jesus had done nothing at this point. He had not begun his ministry. He had healed no one, he had not called any disciples, he had not performed a single miracle. God was pleased with Jesus simply because he had been born, because he was God's Son. To be sure, God had sent Jesus into the world for a specific purpose, but before Jesus could accomplish anything, God announced that he loved Jesus and was proud of him. God did this with a voice that stirred the waters of the river, that rattled the bones of all who heard it. God loved Jesus simply for being.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus was baptized? If Jesus was without sin, why would he need to repent and be baptized? What if Jesus was baptized not for himself but for you and me? What if he walked into the dirty, muddy river to join us in the dark and murky places of our lives? What if he emerged from the water clean and forgiven, not for himself, but for us? What if that booming, proud voice of God was not only proclaiming God's love for God's Son, but for you and me as well?

God loves each one of us simply because God has created us. When we were born to our earthly mothers and fathers, God was there, full of pride. In a booming voice that only the saints in heaven could hear, God announced God's pleasure with us, before we did anything, before we even took our first breath. In our baptism, God joins us with Jesus and all creation, again shouting with joy, so full is God's heart with love for us. It does not matter what you do with your life, God loves you dearly. It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor, if you have a fancy title after your name or the letters GED. It does not matter if you bring children into the world and are surrounded by grandchildren or if you never have children. It doesn't matter which political party you belong to or if you couldn't care less about politics. It doesn't matter if you win the lottery or live on food stamps. It doesn't matter if your life is neat and clean and tidy and fulfilling, or if you take two steps back for each one forward. God loves you. Because you are God's daughter. Because you are God's son. That is what Jesus reveals to us at his baptism. That is what Jesus reminds us of when times get dark and scary, when we forget who we are and think of ourselves as unloved or unlovable.

New Testament scholar Marcus Borg suggests that Jesus himself is the one who takes us to God so that we can experience God's love. Jesus is the one who opens the barrier, and shows us the God we long for. He's the one who stands in line with us at the water's edge, willing to immerse himself in shame, scandal, repentance, and pain — all so that we might hear the only Voice that can tell us who we are and whose we are. Hear this. We are God's own. God's children. God's pleasure. Even when we struggle in the deepest water, we are the Beloved. Don't let anyone – especially the voice in your head – tell you otherwise. God has spoken and claimed you and me as God's own. No matter what. Forever.

Amen.

*Baptism of Jesus C*

*January 10, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 3:15-22*