

Sunday, January 8, 2012: Mark 1:4-11

by [P. C. Enniss](#) in the [December 27, 2011](#) issue

Years ago during the Christmas season, I was in the office of the inner-city congregation I served when the intercom buzzed. "There is a young man here who wants to see you," said the secretary. I knew what that meant. There were many homeless in the neighborhood, and they all asked for money, especially at Christmas. But the emergency relief office was closed, so I said, "Sure, show him in." He was not what I expected. He was neatly dressed, clean-shaven, in his late twenties. There was an air of dignity about him, with no glassy look and none of the usual signs of having been on the streets.

"Sorry to take your time," he apologized, "but I just want your blessing." He did not seem depressed or desperate but in good spirits, polite and very much in control. I attempted to explain that Presbyterians did not usually confer blessings, but the man was not there for a lesson in ecclesiology. "All I want is your blessing," he said again. With some theological misgivings, I agreed and asked his name. "Andy," he said, and knelt on the carpet while I offered a general prayer of thanksgiving for God's presence in Andy's life, an acknowledgment of the ways God had already blessed him and of God's continuing concern and purpose for him. When I said "Amen," Andy stood, smiled, shook my hand, thanked me and left.

I still have no idea of the precise character of the blessing Andy sought. I sensed that it wasn't superficial absolution for some insignificant sin. He was struggling, seeking some assurance that his life counted, that it had some purpose he had not found or had lost touch with. In choosing one of God's anonymous representatives for a blessing, Andy was unknowingly mirroring what the psalmist identified as a thirst for God, and Augustine named "a restlessness of the soul." Academics and ordinary folk alike tell anecdotal tales of feeling abandoned, forgotten or not wanted. "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" is not exclusively an African-American gospel song. Human consensus validates a universal longing for parental approval.

Karl Barth referred to Jesus' baptism as a "summary of the essence of the gospel." The astounding epiphany, dramatized by the heavens opening and the Spirit descending as a dove, lies in the revelation that God is no longer hidden in the

heavens but has become incarnate in the person of Jesus. All we need to know about God is now knowable in the character, purpose and grace of Jesus. Chrysostom placed more importance on Jesus' baptism than on his birth, contending that "he became manifest to all . . . when he was baptized." In the Elijah-like epiphany of Mark's baptism narrative, Jesus is who God says he is: "My beloved son." Connecting Mark's testimony with Paul's words (Gal. 4:4-7), we see that through Christ we too are sons and daughters of God by adoption.

In *Feasting on the Word*, Rodney Hunter describes the Jordan River epiphany as a psychological event that "realigns the individual into profound attunement with that which is highest and best in his or her universe of meaning and value." The epiphany (conversion, awakening) impelled Jesus to respond to John's call to repent and be baptized so that he emerged from the water with a vision of himself as one with a God-given identity and affirmation. It was through the baptismal event that Jesus perceived God's call into the wilderness, where he experienced a deep spiritual struggle and emerged as "a new man, by all appearances, with supernatural powers and a revolutionary spiritual message."

However one interprets the Jordan River account, the transformative words are, "You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased," arguably the most coveted words in human language. On the human level, they're heard as an affirmation of acceptance, pride and approval from a parent to a child. However, when Mark's account of Jesus' baptism is read through the eyes of Paul in Galatians, the words take on a significantly broader meaning. In *Feasting on the Word*, Lamar Williamson says that while the epiphany establishes Jesus' identity as the Son of God, it also establishes our identity as God's adoptive sons and daughters. It is precisely at times when we feel our own unworthiness that the text speaks to each of us. Without presuming divine identity with Jesus, we can affirm that we are all in our own unique and different ways children of God and joint heirs of God's promise of unconditional grace. The text is a blessed assurance as well as a mandate for living our lives as brothers and sisters to all who need the good news.

When I reflect on my encounter with Andy, I pray that he's realized that he is unconditionally one of God's precious children. That is the essence of our faith, which nobody has defined better than Paul Tillich in his insistence that faith is "the courage to accept acceptance."