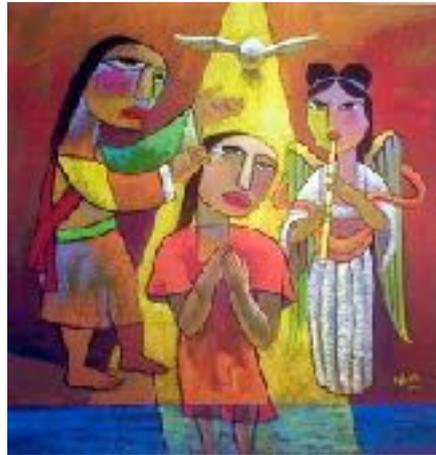


Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
First Sunday of Epiphany
The Baptism of Christ
13 January 2019

“Affirmation as Inclusivity”
Second in a sermon series entitled “Inclusivity Matters”

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7
Christian Scripture: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22



For those of you who do not know, yesterday was my birthday. I
felt very affirmed all day as many *celebrated* my birthday.



I do not think that I celebrated my birthday.



I say this because I think after the age of twenty-one, few celebrate growing older. Also, many of us do not celebrate our *own* birthday is because it would bring us unwanted attention that can make us feel uncomfortable. Truth be told, I waited until 11:30pm to open my presents, because I'm uncomfortable about people making a fuss over me.



I felt uncomfortable all day because many of you showered me with affection all day. Yesterday, I was wished a happy birthday from the moment I woke-up. Text messages on my phone binged and banged all day. My Facebook account was working overtime. Those at the space envisioning workshop yesterday sang happy birthday to me. Margo, Priscilla, Bonnie and Stephanie all wished me a happy birthday

over lunch at the Winter Market. A gift from the McCarty's even made the drafting of a master calendar a delight. Last night I had a delightful dinner and my favourite dessert, berries, to celebrate. An Irish coffee brought the festivities to a conclusion at about midnight. I know I am not a perfect person - not as a partner, not as a father, not as a minister and not as a Christian. Yet, yesterday I was affirmed and affirmed and affirmed and affirmed. I wonder if anyone *deserves* such affirmation. I certainly do not think I deserved it.



After all, I did was be born and I had nothing to do with that. And all I did last year was not die. And I scarcely did anything to prevent that, save eat and drink a couple times a day!



And this is the point of my message this morning: I received the blessing of being affirmed yesterday, simply for being alive, for being a

child of God, created in the image of God. Yesterday was not ‘Happy “You Did the Dishes Well” Day’. Yesterday was not ‘Happy “You Folded All the Clothes Nicely” Day’; it was not ‘Happy “You Told an Interesting Story at the Space Envisioning Workshop Yesterday” Day’. Yesterday was not ‘Happy “You Helped Draft the Master Calendar” Day!’ Yesterday, was “Happy *Birth*day”. I was affirmed for my birth and life lived.



This Sunday we recognize the baptism of Jesus when the Holy Spirit descended upon him and a voice from heaven declared, “Thou Art my Son, my Beloved, on thee my favour rests” (Luke 3:22). Here Jesus received God’s affirmation. The scriptures tell us that as Jesus grew older, he grew “big and strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40). Yet, one cannot receive credit of growing ‘big and strong’. Even wisdom is considered God-given. We also read in the scriptures that those in Jesus’ village who knew him, did not think he deserved any specific praise or accolades (John 6:42, John 7:5, Mark 6:3). They claimed they knew him and his

family and there was not nothing extraordinary about him. There is the also the curious question of why Jesus was baptised with everyone else, with all the sinners.



John preached repentance and after preaching repentance, he baptized. Our reading states that “During a general baptism of the people”, Jesus too was dunked. Interpret that as you will. Finally, we know that Jesus had not even begun his ministry until about the age or thirty, *after* he was baptised. Nonetheless, despite the Bible not recording that Jesus did anything particularly notable before the age of thirty, God declared: “Thou art my Son, my Beloved; on thee my favour rests”. My point here is that as I read the Bible, it is not clear, in fact there is much doubt, that Jesus’ abundant and beautiful divine affirmation was based on anything that he had previously done or accomplished. I wonder then, did Jesus receive God’s favour because of merit? I don’t think so. Or, is it possible that Jesus reached his fullest God-given potential because at his baptism he felt perfectly assured of God’s favour; did he fulfill his calling because he

experienced God's love in a profound manner? I ask you this 'chicken and egg' question. Did Jesus' faithfulness to God cause God to favour Jesus? Or, did God's favour felt by Jesus cause Jesus to be more faithful to God? I believe the latter, that God's love and affirmation caused Jesus to be more faithful to his calling rather than Jesus was faithful to his calling and only thus received God's favour and love.



I understand that Jesus' baptism was a declaration of God's love for Jesus and Jesus' feeling of God's love enabled him to be faithful to God's calling.

Friends in Christ, so many in this world do not reach their God-given potential because society, and even the church, does not appreciate how God created them.



Almost all societies are patriarchal and thus girls are less valued than boys. Hence, within patriarchy boys are better enabled to reach their fullest God-given potential.



Likewise, our racist society prejudices people of colour and privileges Whites. Hence, in the United States practiced slavery and, since the end of the Civil War, the mass incarceration of people of colour.



In our materialist society, people are often evaluated on the basis of their net worth, rather than their inherent worth. So, as best observed

by CEO remuneration packages, the income inequality in this country grows; the rich become richer and the poor become poorer.



For hundreds and thousands of years, there is an irrational privilege of heterosexuals and a prejudice against those who do not consider themselves heterosexual, thus causing enormous self-loathing, depression, fear, shame, and loss of self-esteem among them.



I am proud that we are an Open and Affirming congregation. I have been in many churches whereby some say that they are 'open', but they are not 'affirming' of gays and lesbians. But in the baptism of Jesus, I learn that 'affirmation' is crucial to people feeling God's acceptance and love. It is this profound experience of God's love and affirmation that leads people to reach their fullest God-given

potential. To be 'open' without being 'affirming' is not really possible. You can't be open to people if you do not accept how God created them. When we are 'Open and Affirming', we affirm people who are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender for *who they are*, for how God created them - not for any good or bad behaviour. When we refuse to affirm, we are not denouncing behaviour, we are denouncing who and what people inherently are. Girls must be affirmed - because of who they are - girls. Children must be affirmed because they are children. People of colour must be affirmed because of who they are. The poor must be affirmed because of who they are. The LGBTIQ community must be affirmed because of who they are. As people of faith, we must affirm anyone marginalised by society. When we are 'Open and Affirming', it is not people's behaviour that is affirmed, it is rather people's inherent worth.



Yesterday, no one wished me Happy Birthday because of something I did. It was my birth, my creation by God, that was celebrated and affirmed. "Happy *Birth*day". Because of my birth, you

affirmed me. And your affirmation drives me to serve you all the more, just as God's affirmation of Jesus enabled his dedication to God. Jesus had not even begun his ministry and the Bible records little of merit that Jesus accomplished before his affirmation. It was before his ministry began that God declared through the Holy Spirit that God's favour rested on Jesus. Thereafter, Jesus felt empowered to live-out his life according to God's purpose. So, may it be for all of us.

This was the Word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, the people of God responded, "Amen!"