

With You I Am Well Pleased  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

One of the oddities of being a United Methodist preacher is that we move so often it's not unusual to have boxes we move a couple of times without even opening. When you do finally get around to opening them, it's like a time capsule. When we moved here, I opened one of those boxes and found my son's soccer trophy. He got the trophy at the end of his first season of playing soccer when he was about seven years old. After the last game, they had a "banquet" for the team. (Well, they took them to Pizza Hut, which, for seven-year-olds is a banquet.) At the banquet they gave every member of the team a trophy. He didn't get the trophy for winning the championship. His team didn't come close to winning a championship. He didn't get the trophy for being an outstanding player. He wasn't. He got the trophy for being on the team. He got the trophy for showing up.

I remember thinking when they handed out the trophies, "That's ridiculous. Trophies are supposed to go to a few players who accomplish something outstanding." That's the way it was when I was a kid. You didn't give a trophy to everybody, just the winners.

But, when I think about it now, I realize that all those kids did deserve a trophy. They did show up. I believe it was Woody Allen who said, "Ninety percent of life is just showing up." That's what these kids did. Win or lose, they stuck with the team to the end. Most of the time, most of them played the best they could. That's worth a trophy.

Whenever I baptize someone, I remind you that because we share in Christ's baptism when we were baptized. When Jesus was baptized, the Father spoke from heaven and declared, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." When we are baptized, God also speaks from heaven and says, "You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

I don't know about you, but I find it hard to believe that God is well pleased with me. I'm not even pleased with myself, and my standards are not nearly as high as God's. How can God possibly be pleased with me?

I understand how God could be pleased with Jesus. He was perfect. He never committed a sin. Even a holy and righteous God could be pleased with someone like that. But we are sinners. How could God be pleased with us?

Well, let's think about what it means to say you are pleased with someone. Sometimes it just means that we're glad they showed up.

Preachers sure understand that. We probably don't say it often enough, but preachers just are pleased that people show up on Sunday morning. Whether or not you do anything else in the church, I want to say, "Thanks for showing up." Without you we couldn't have a worship service. If I could, I would have the ushers give each of you a trophy just for showing up this morning.

Is God pleased with us for just showing up? You bet. Before you ever did a thing to earn God's pleasure, God was pleased with you. Why? Because you are a child of God, and God takes great pleasure in God's children.

Those of you who are parents understand that. If you ask a parent of a child if they are pleased with their child, almost all of them would say, "Oh yes! Yes! Yes! I am very pleased with my child." Even when they are exhausted from caring for their child twenty-four hours a

day, seven days a week, when their child has done nothing to earn their approval, when, in fact, they have done everything to earn their displeasure—waking them up at all hours of the night, demanding to be fed, whether it is convenient or not, dirtying their little diapers and demanding to be cleaned up—even after all that, parents are still very pleased with their children for just being there.

And that doesn't go away. I'm sixty years old. When I call my mother, which I don't do nearly often enough, she never fails to tell me how pleased she is that I am her child. I used to take her pleasure in me for granted, until I got into the real world and discovered there were a lot of people who weren't that pleased at all that I showed up.

When God says to us at our baptism, "You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased," God is saying, "I am so pleased that you showed up in this world."

That's grace. God loves us because God loves us. There's nothing we can do to earn God's love for us. There's nothing we can do to destroy God's love for us. God loves us because we are God's children and God loves God's children.

But when the Father spoke from heaven to say to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," was He just saying, "I'm so pleased you showed up?"

At the end of the story of Jesus getting lost in the Temple when he was twelve years old. After Mary and Joseph found him and took him home to Nazareth, the gospel writers tell us that Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. If God loved Jesus totally and completely from the time he entered in this world, how could Jesus grow in favor with God?

Well, we understand that too, don't we? I loved my children with my whole heart from the very start. I will always love them. But there have been times when I have wanted to jerk a knot in their tails.

You see, there's a difference between unconditional love and unconditional approval. I think that we, as a society and as a denomination need to rediscover that distinction. When John Wesley went into a town and shared the gospel of salvation by faith through grace, there were always a number of people who accepted that salvation. But John Wesley didn't just say, "Good for you," and then go on to the next town. Instead, he met with these new Methodists. He insisted that they must grow and maturity in Christ. He organized them into a society. They were to meet with the society weekly and hold each other accountable for growing in holiness and righteousness. They were given a list of questions they were to use to examine each other. If they failed to live up to Christian holiness, they were confronted. We don't do that anymore, do we? We are too nice to express disapproval, even if it means that people have fallen into a pattern of behavior which is destructive.

Failure to express disapproval is not loving. Love cares too much to remain silent.

I don't always approve of the things my kids do. When they do things the way I think they should, I am pleased. When they don't do them the way I think they should, I am not happy about it.

God is the same way. God will always love us. But God sometimes disapproves of the things we think or say or feel or do.

That's the difference between Jesus and us. When the Father told Jesus He was pleased with him, He wasn't just saying, "I am pleased that you showed up," He was also saying, "I approve of everything you have done and are doing."

God can't say that about us. God doesn't approve of everything we do. We do things that bring heartache and pain to ourselves and to the people around us. God isn't pleased with those things.

Even when God isn't pleased with our actions, God is still pleased with us.

When Becky and I were with our children and grandchildren during the holidays, we took them to one of those steakhouses that has a bucket of peanuts at the table for you to eat while you're waiting for your order. We were all enjoying the peanuts. I would shell them for the grandchildren. There was another bucket for the shells. Well, we had just about filled that bucket up with shells when my three-year-old grandson grabbed it. I could read his mind. He was thinking what great fun it would be to dump that bucket of peanut shells. I grabbed the bucket before he could turn it over. We had a wrestling match, and I won. I took the bucket from him and put it out of his reach. He gave me a look that said, "Grandpa, don't you love me anymore?" Yes, of course I still loved him. It was because I loved him and everyone else around that table, and even the waitress, that I didn't let him do what he was wanting to do. He and the rest of us would have spent the rest of the meal in misery, sitting on peanut shells and eating on peanut shells. He is a happy, fun-loving kid. That pleases me greatly. But when his fun will result in misery, I cannot approve of it.

When we were baptized, God gave us unconditional love. But God did not give us unconditional approval.

Approval has to be won. And that's a good thing. We have better lives because we have to win approval.

I remember a woman talking about her grandmother. She was telling me about what a great influence her grandmother was on her life. She said, "I will always be grateful for my grandmother, because she would never let me settle for mediocrity. On many occasions she said to me, 'Norma, you can do better than that.' She was saying two very important things to me. She was saying that she did not approve of what I had done. And she was saying that she had faith that I could do well enough to win her approval. And when I did my best, she always let me know that she appreciated it. I had to work at it, but time and again I did win her approval. She pushed me to be a better person."

I think that is what God does for us. God is pleased with us because we were created in God's image. God is holy and righteous, and we have the capacity to grow into holiness and righteousness.

God wants us to grow into what we were created to be. In Christ we see what we were created to be.

Now, none of us are as good as we can get. And God does not disapprove of us until we reach that level of goodness. God is pleased with us if we are growing. If we are doing the best we can, God will be pleased with us.

You are a child of God. In your baptism God has given you the assurance that God will always be pleased with you. As wonderful as that is, it is even better to have God's approval. Jesus grew in favor with God. That should be our goal as well.

When I stand before the Judgment Seat, I will be thrilled to hear God say, "I'm pleased with you because you showed up." However, I hope God will be able to go on and say something like this, "Because of your faithful obedience I was able to touch people through you and help them have better, stronger, happier lives. I was able to strengthen the Church. I was able to build my Kingdom. I was able to make the world a better place. Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

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