

**Beloved
Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
January 13, 2019**

Matthew 3:1-17

I was probably one of the worst band parents the Trumbull High Marching Band and Winter Percussion had ever seen.

Not on purpose, mind you! I didn't try to get the director fired for yelling at the kids too much. I wasn't bringing drama to the fundraising meetings. I didn't question why my high school daughter needed 20 hours of practice a week. Not publicly, at least.

As a band mom, I was just a no show.

I had a valid excuse, I think. I was only a couple of years into a brand new call here, as a full time associate pastor. In my role, there were projects and programs, deadlines and responsibilities to take care of at the church and still so much to learn. Clark had a little more flexibility, since he had left his job in car sales to train to be a teacher and had weekends free, but my time was at a premium.

So when Clark and I attended that first parent's band meeting we agreed that he'd be the "band dad", and I'd participate as much as my schedule allowed (which wouldn't be much!).

There were so many dates for the family calendar, and so many opportunities to lead or contribute. We knew we had landed in a nationally ranked music program, and that it was our responsibility to do what we could to support it. Surely there would be a place for me to help, eventually.

For five years, Clark showed up. Nearly every weekend, most school holidays, rain or shine. Eventually, he served a couple of years as Operations Manager. You need something heavy moved? Talk to Clark. You need someone to drive all the band equipment to Ohio overnight in a massive truck? He's your guy. Looking for security to guard the convoy while the band marches in the 2008 Presidential inauguration? Clark was there.

But I wasn't. I didn't think it was that big of a deal, until I tried to volunteer for the Trumbull Classic, a big end of season fundraising event. My 4 hour shift at the hot dog table went a little something like this... "Oh, look, we have a newbie with us. What's your name, hun? Gingras? Are you related to

Clark? You're his wife? I thought he was widowed or divorced or something. Didn't know that you even existed!"

Now, it was funny the first time, even if the volunteer coordinator who said it came across pretty snarky. I laughed, because I knew I had contributed absolutely nothing up to that point but a big, fat tuition check. Jokes on me, I guess!

A few weeks later, I volunteered for another fundraiser. And no one would speak to me or give me things to do. I stood around, watching the other parents laugh and have a good time and work hard. By the fifth year of being made to feel like I was an outsider, I was so ready to be done.

We all have stories, I'm sure, of being made to feel excluded or less than – many of them far more egregious than my tale of woe as a Band Mom Outsider. Some of us came from families in which we weren't accepted for being who we are. Others tried hard to join a group, a sports team, a circle of neighborhood friends, and weren't quite welcomed with open arms. It's a universal feeling. I think most of us need other people to tell us from time to time that we do, indeed, belong.

The Temple in Jerusalem was built like a fortress, right on tip of the highest hill, surrounded by massive stone walls. Within the Temple itself, there were grand chambers, entered through massive doors, each chamber leading to another one, and into the very center of the building.

You could not go into one of these chambers without participating in some cleansing and purification rituals. These rituals were more rigorous (and expensive) the deeper you planned to go into the Temple. Even the small town Pilgrims who had traveled at great personal cost were expected to wash themselves in a ritual bath, rinsing the dust of the road and their sins away.

In the center of the Temple was this room called the Holy of holies. The Arc of the Covenant was kept there. This was God's place. Only the high priest could enter. It was gilded with gold, a pristine, perfect home for God.

An ordinary person could never get close to that Holy place. No sick person could ever get past even the outer wall of the Temple – to be sick was to be impure. No foreigner could get close. Foreigners, aliens, were impure, imperfect. No women, no widows, no orphans, no outcasts. Only the perfect, or close to perfect, the purified, the pious, and ritually clean, could get close.

Over and over again, we human beings place God, or our concept of God at a distance from us. We create barriers of privilege, of so-called purity and perfection, barriers of piousness between ourselves and God.

So that only the insiders, the proper, and the rule makers and rule-keepers are allowed in. And the rest of us, we are left outside.

Perhaps we are the hardest judges of ourselves. We hear the words of scorn our society directs at us. You're too poor, too ugly, too strange. You're too gay, you have an accent, you don't dress right, you don't live in the right zip code. You aren't living up to expectations.

And some of it sticks like tar on the soles of our feet, and we wonder why would God have anything to do with one such as me?

There may be people in this room who have experienced abuse at the hands and voices of others: abuse which stripped them of their humanity and left them deeply wounded.

So that even when the pain stops, the scars linger, leaving feelings of being somehow damaged, imperfect, unworthy, separated from the very presence of God.

Into this confusion, this sense of separation, God sends Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God comes to us, into the grimy reality of human life.

If we have been too quick to forget the cold and the dirt of the manger, in the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, God makes it plain.

The Jordan River is not a grand river like the Nile, the Euphrates, or the Mississippi; it is a scrappy, scraggly stream of water through the Rift Valley. It begins at the inland Sea of Galilee and meanders down into the Dead Sea. You can walk across it and have a dry head of hair when you get to the other side.

Then, as now, it is a major source of water for millions of people living in an arid climate. Then, as now, it has been used as a sewer. Then, as now, animals and humans used the river for whatever they need.

And although there are few competing sites scholars have identified as the place where Jesus was baptized, I can tell you from my visits that the Jordan River itself is rather narrow and slippery. The water is muddy, muddy, muddy and you can't see your feet or legs once you are in it.

I can imagine Jesus walking those 70 miles from Nazareth on a hot, humid day. The place is crowded with hundreds, maybe thousands of people trying to hear John preach and baptize them.

It is slippery, muddy, mucky, and maybe even smelly in the heat. But it's the water that Jesus enters. This water is not crystal blue, or pristine, or perfect, or beautiful. This muddy riverbank is no gold leaf covered room in the center of a temple.

Then he places himself in the hands of John the Baptist, an itinerant preacher who was wild, and a little dangerous. John recognizes Jesus for who he is and protests. It is the human system of honor, the superior should never be seen bowing to the inferior one.

But again, Jesus turns human rules and expectations upside down. And he is baptized by John. And God says, "*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*"

His baptism reflects upon his ministry that is to come. He is ready to get into the grime, slime and mess of humanity. He will go to the people that the world judges to be inferior, impure, imperfect, and unholy. And he will make them whole, and holy – assuring them they are worthy and are admitted to the Kingdom of God made present through his actions.

He will go to the places of brokenness – to the homeless, and the lepers, to the prostitutes, and bleeding women. He will go to the foreigners and the demon possessed, and he will sanctify them.

Christ comes to us not only in our joyful moments but also when we have screwed up badly, when we get it all wrong and we hurt others. Even then, perhaps especially then, Christ proclaims you are still my beloved daughter, you are still my beloved son. In my love for you, I offer you forgiveness.

In Christ, God comes to us, where we are. God comes into the cancer room, the prison cell, and the Alzheimer's unit. God comes to us in our brokenness and says I am with you – you are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter. You belong.

From our first breath we are worthy of God's love, and we receive it – no matter what we do, no matter what is done to us. There is no test, no trick question, there is no false guilt – there is only the truth. We are beloved of God, in whom she is well pleased. Amen.