

BAPTISMAL Affirmation
Sermon, January 10, 2016
Baptism of the Lord Sunday
Text: Mark 1:4-11

I want to begin by thanking everyone for the many cards, notes and emails of condolences, the extravagant fruit basket I found on my front doorstep yesterday, the prayers, the offers of help, and those of you who made the long journey from here to Pennsylvania to attend the funeral service for my father this past Thursday. For those who don't know, my Dad passed very unexpectedly and suddenly a week ago yesterday; there was no warning, no hint at all that anything like this was imminent. I'm so grateful I was able to visit with my parents the previous Sunday while my son filled the pulpit here; as I sat with my father in worship that Sunday in the Methodist church of my childhood (*my parents are charter members*), I had no way of knowing I was sitting with him in what would be his last service of worship while Mom sang in the choir (*as she had just about every Sunday since 1965*). Dad touched so many lives, as many of you saw in his obituary;¹ the line for the calling hours which preceded the service stretched out into the parking lot and around the building and then some; we had to delay the start of the funeral by almost two hours. The service was a fitting tribute to a full life very well lived, and a glorious send off to the life to come.

During the service I told the story of how my father, while a junior at Haverford High School, somewhat ambitiously wooed and dated and courted the captain of the cheerleaders, Anna May Durand. But I also understand he had some encouragement from Anna May Durand to do so ... as the old saying goes, "a man pursues a woman until she catches him." My mother has been his biggest and most affirming cheerleader ever since; she was a constant and steady source of encouragement, support, loving care and affirmation to him throughout their lives together ... actually, she AND he were that way for all of the family; none of us ever doubted our parents' love and care for us. Successful, talented and well known as my Dad was, he and we knew his greatest accomplishment was marrying well. I'm told he was actually somewhat shy and even a bit introverted in high school, my mom's encouragement helped bring out his gregarious, endearing, humorous and loving best.

Dad was six weeks into his first semester as a freshman at Duke University when they learned my mother's father was being transferred, and the family would be leaving their Philadelphia area home for faraway Gary, Indiana ... I remember him telling me that in those days before interstate highways it was like she was moving to the moon. To make a long story short, he packed his belongings, dropped out of Duke, drove back home, and eloped with my mother across the state border in Elkton, Maryland, where it was legal for seventeen-year-olds to marry without parental consent. My grandfather ... after he calmed down ... arranged a job for his new son in law at the Budd Company in Gary; my two older brothers and I were born there in Gary (*yes, I share the same home town as The Music Man and Michael Jackson*). They moved back to Pennsylvania when I was five, and sister Carol came along soon after ... sadly, when she was just six weeks of age, she contracted the spinal meningitis that would render her totally deaf for life. Some of you have met her, she and her deaf husband have managed very well and have raised three hearing and healthy children to adulthood; they are now grandparents as well. In November 1965, tragedy struck our family again when Dad's brother and his dear wife were lost in a private plane accident off the Florida Keys, soon after my siblings and I were privileged and blessed to have our cousins become our new sister and brother, making Ann and Alan Clark the parents of six. They would go on to become the grandparents of twenty two, the great grandparents of five; yes, we Clarks were fruitful and we multiplied. My parents faithfully, honorably, tenderly and joyful fulfilled the marital vows made as teenagers in that Elkton wedding chapel on October 28, 1950 ... for better, for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death did them part a week ago yesterday; sixty-five years and sixty-five days of faithfulness. It is impossible for me to think of one without the other; they were inseparable. They not only loved each other, it was obvious they LIKED each other. My parents have long been a source and model of enduring love, faithfulness, stability and responsibility to all whose lives they touched ... always affirming, always encouraging. Now, hold that thought for a moment, while I tell another story.

Near the turn of the twentieth century, two altar boys served in two Roman Catholic churches thousands of miles from each other. One was born May 7, 1892 in the little Croatian village of Kumrovec. The other was born May 8, 1895, just three years and a day later, in El Paso, Illinois (*near Peoria*). Though they lived very separate lives in very different parts of the world, these two altar boys had almost identical life-transforming experiences. Each boy was given the opportunity to assist his parish priest in the service of Communion. And each boy, while handling the communion cup, accidentally spilled some of the wine on the carpet. There the similarities end.

The priest in the Croatian church, seeing the purple stain on the carpet, slapped the little altar boy hard, across the face, and shouted, "*Clumsy oaf! Leave the altar!*" That little boy left. He also left the church ... for good. That little

¹ See <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/dailylocal/obituary.aspx?n=alan-f-clark&pid=177144770&fhid=4664>

boy grew up to become an atheist and a staunch Communist. His name was Josip Broz Tito ... the strongman dictator of the former Yugoslavia from 1943 to 1980. The priest in the church in Illinois, upon seeing the stain near the altar, knelt down to the little boy's level, looked him tenderly in the eyes and said, "It's all right, son. You'll do better next time. You'll be a fine priest for God someday." THAT little boy grew up to become the much loved Bishop Fulton J. Sheen (known for his work on television and radio, he was the first televangelist ... his most well-known programs *The Catholic Hour* and *Life Is Worth Living*).² Two young boys, similar in age, with two similar experiences, but with very different endings. Two young boys with a universal human need: the need to be encouraged, appreciated, affirmed, and loved.

Another story: Harriett Beecher Stowe (author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) achieved her first literary triumph at the age of twelve. She was a student at Litchfield Academy in CT. With the other Litchfield students, she was required to submit an essay at the end of the term. Her essay was awarded first prize by unanimous vote of the judges and was one of two essays read by the headmaster at the graduation ceremony that year. The paper was so outstanding, the audience applauded when it was read. When it was announced to everyone's surprise that twelve year old Harriett was the author (and not one of the much older graduating seniors), her father smiled proudly from the stage. He was on the stage because he was the clergyman who had given the invocation; Lyman Beecher was the renowned pastor of the local Presbyterian church. According to Harriett Beecher Stowe's biographer, Noel Gerson, seeing her father's proud smile was a reward Harriett cherished as long as she lived. Mr. Gerson wrote, "Neither the honors nor the success she won in later life meant as much to her [as her father's smile], and, in effect, that smile determined her career."³

Deep within the heart of every young person is the need to have a father or a mother smile and say, "Well done. I'm proud of you. You're a good kid!" as my parents were so faithful in doing. I don't think there is a son or daughter in this world who is not thrilled by praise from a parent, regardless of age. For some, that remains a lifelong primary motivation that drives them on to do well, even though their parents may have been gone for many years. For some, sadly, that is a crushing burden to carry, because there are some who are haunted by the specter of un-affirming parents who could never be satisfied, parents whose preferred mode of "nurture" is constant "not-good-enough" criticism. No matter what they did, they could never seem to measure up, and no matter what they continue to do, they never feel they measure up to what was perceived as unrelenting parental demands. Feminist author Faye Welden actually expressed relief when her mother died, saying that now there was one less pair of eyes to judge her. For better or worse, rare is the person who does not want to please Mom or Dad. It also works the other way. Who among us parents doesn't want our children to be proud of us? Who wants to be the cause of a child's embarrassment? What a powerful bond between parent and child. How we love to please one another.

I hope all parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, coaches, youth leaders and anyone else in this room who may be entrusted with the care of children will take every opportunity to tell the children in your care how proud you are of them and how thankful you are for the privilege of having them in your life! I'll add a qualifier to that: Don't do what some parents do ... when they say, "I'm proud," it sounds more like self-congratulation, as if to say (with a pat on their own back), "What a great parent I am." No, that's bragging on yourself, that's not affirming your child. Another qualifier: No matter how hard we work at parenting, there are so many other influences working against us; there are so many other negative factors that can come into play. Sometimes a child can lose his or her way. Sometimes a child can and will make mistakes. A child can and will make bad decisions, even with the best parenting. It's been said that between the ages of twelve and seventeen, a parent can age thirty years. But again, remember our two altar boys. Affirmation and encouragement can make all the difference.

All of this is a really long introduction to our Gospel text for the day (but don't worry, I'm almost finished). Mark tells us that at Jesus' baptism Jesus and everyone else clearly heard the voice of God saying to Him, "You are My son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased!" What a marvelous affirmation! A father publicly and vocally and proudly pleased with his son. Yes, this was no ordinary son and this was no ordinary father, and earthly analogies can break down, but can you feel something of the humanness of Jesus on this unforgettable occasion? Can you feel something of the warmth and pleasure and elation in His heart as He receives His Father's very vocal and very public affirmation of His love and pleasure? And with that approval, Jesus is launched into His public ministry. Those of us who are or who hope to be parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, youth leaders, coaches, counselors can learn a lesson from Father God. Healthy and affirming relationships motivate, energize, encourage! Those we baptize in this church are entrusted to our care, they are our family and are to be treated as such. Just as the Father-God said to Jesus on the day of His baptism, "You are my beloved son. I'm pleased with you!" so should we time and again publicly affirm and encourage those entrusted to our care, assuring them of our love and pleasure.

Let them know we are pleased! Pleased for the kind of young men and young women they are becoming, pleased that God has given us the privilege of having them in our lives. In so doing we, too, might just launch them into a lifetime of ministry and service; we, too, may play an affirming and encouraging part in launching a new generation who will go on to make a redemptive and saving difference in this world.

² *Mistreated*, Ron Lee Davis, Multnomah Press, Portland, OR, 1989, pp. 138-139

³ *Harriett Beecher Stowe*, New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1976