

## Who are We and What is our Mission?

Let me introduce myself. My name is Cabell Tennis but most people call me Cabby. I am the former dean of St. Mark's Cathedral and also the former Bishop of the Diocese of Delaware. I live with Hyde my wife, who is not here today because she's in Philadelphia with a dear friend. We live at Skyline, so we are neighbors. I have served you in times past; once preaching in the parish hall when you were repairing the church from earthquake damage; once for a wedding with a couple who did not want to take on the Cathedral when a circus was on the front lawn, and a few times for one of the weekday Eucharist.

So that is who I am, somebody unique, odd, and an individual person. As are you, maybe less odd. No one ever before and no one ever will be again be the person that you and I are. We are unique individual human beings; we are one of a kind. Nevertheless, do we share any thing in common? Is there is something belonging to us and basic to all of us. In other words, do we have a common identity as well as an individual identity?

Also there is the question of whether there is a path forward for our lives; that even though each of us is on an individual journey, do we nevertheless us share in a common direction? Do we have a common mission?

Jesus, whose wondrous and beautiful birth was accompanied by choirs of angels and celebrated by adoring shepherds, now steps onto the stage of history. He goes along with the milling crowds to the banks of the Jordan River. There he is called by John the Baptist to join those who have come to be baptized. As he steps into the waters. He wades out to John and is baptized by him in the very waters which Joshua lead the people of Israel into the promised land.

As Jesus emerges from this baptism he enters deeply into prayer. The Spirit of God descends upon like a dove. A voice comes out of heaven saying, "you are my son, the beloved, my favor rest upon you." This is Jesus's identity. He is the beloved. He is precious and of infinite value in God's eyes is, in a word he is not just approved, he is loved. He is cared about and appreciated. He, as a human being, is bound to the source of all being. He is the beloved of God. This is the identity of Jesus.

Every one of us in here today by our own baptism have entered with Jesus into the Jordon River. We have waded out into it and so become a part of the community of Jesus the Christ. We have become a part of the community of the beloved. Every single person who has entered into Christ through baptism has implanted in his or her personal history an indelible identity. You are a person who is precious and of infinite value. You are a person bound to the source of the whole creation.

Martin Luther King Junior, whose birthday we commemorate a week from tomorrow, used to describe the church as “the beloved community.” When he spoke this way he was pointing to the indelible identity that belongs to every person who has passed through the waters of baptism and into the community of Jesus who is the Christ.

“You are the beloved”. But I have to ask to whom all these words spoken? Is it only to the chosen? Is it only to the baptized? Is God’s favor only for such is we who gather as a part of the Christian community.

In a reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Peter begins what scholars have long recognized as the outline of the sermon, a baptismal sermon. He gets a clear answer to any speculation that would limit the identity of the beloved to this or any other religious community or indeed any non-religious community. Peter was struggling with the issue of whether God’s favor is contained only within the Jewish community as he struggled he came to a generous truth. He had a dream, a vision and out of that vision and he came to say, “The truth I have now come to realize is that God does not have any favorites. God shows no partiality.” The truth is that the belongingness of God embraces every single human being, there are no exceptions. Indeed, God’s love in embraces all of creation.

“You are my beloved”, is the word of God to all of God’s creatures, all of God’s daughters and sons. Baptism into Christ is not confirm or grant belovedness. Baptism is a sign; it is a manifestation; it is an Epiphany; it is a revelation of a belovedness that isn’t grafted in each and every one and all of us. To be in Jesus the Christ is to be baptized into the Christian community, where we are to share the awareness, to celebrate to truth, that we all are God’s children Gods beloved. It is to know and to lift up the truth that every single person is precious.

Jesus, in his baptism, comes to a deep awareness of his identity, as also we must. This awareness of identity propels him toward his mission as a bearer of belovedness. He understands that he is sent to do the work of the beloved servant. He is to be the instrument of God’s belovedness. He is to be a sign of God’s inclusion of the whole human family in the Love of God.

So what is our mission? If we also are bearers of the mission of the beloved, what does that look like? Is it not Justice, justice for all, true justice that is God’s purpose? I am convinced that Justice is the mission of the beloved community. Justice is the form of the human community formed by love. As Reinhold Niebuhr once put it “Justice is Love with its working clothes on”. Justice is belovedness in terms of the human community. It is the work of the beloved of God.

Justice can call us to a major change in our national and international community live. I wish we were hearing more proposals for Justice in the political campaigns. But it can also be closer, more individual and community actions. Many of you have opportunities at work or as a volunteer. Giving persons simple recognition can be a profoundly needed act of justice.

Let me share an experience I have had in this neighborhood. It begins as an old friend and colleague, Craig Rennebohm, who spend most of his ministry seeking out and being with the homeless, especially those in this neighborhood. Craig spoke to the Residents of Skyline about the folks he worked with and was asked questions by us of how to respond to encounters with such folk. He simply said that we could just say hello or a word of greeting that might acknowledge the person as a person.

I took this to heart and began to follow Craig's path. I now try to speak a word of acknowledgement to every person my dog Ella and I meet on our rounds in the neighborhood. The response has been very important to me. These little encounters on one or two or three occasions have led to conversations of acknowledgment and respect. I can only think of them as works of mercy and justice, living into my identity as a beloved of God and sharing that with the people I encounter here, in this neighborhood.

One morning Ella and I were walking along Ninth Avenue and heading toward the intersection with Columbia. There was a man sitting along the wall at the St. James pastoral center. I had met him before. But in front of me was a large flock of crows walking along. As Ella and I approached them they just moved further ahead along the sidewalk. The man sitting there saw us with the crows. He turned to us and said, "That is the first time I've ever seen anyone herd a flock of crows. He recognizes us as we had recognized him. That is one of the gifts of recognizing in people in the way.

So it is that we come to see our life as the beloved of God. This is our deepest identity as a human person. Out of this identity comes the purpose of our life. We are to live a life that expresses God's love for all of our sisters and brothers along the way. That is the meaning of justice. Justice is a mission of our lives.

AMEN

Cabell Tennis