

We began worship by giving thanks for the waters of baptism and then watched as Jesus, standing in the Jordan, was declared God's BELOVED SON.

God's saving claim upon us embodied in the promise-laden waters of Earth is at the heart and center of worship today—and of our lives as followers of Jesus.

We see this grace, we touch it, we welcome it, we remember it. And we give thanks for how it accompanies and shapes our lives all through this journey we're on.

God meets us in the water and we hear God's voice—as Jesus did—declaring:
You are my beloved child; you are precious to me and I love you!

This declaration is the foundation of our spiritual lives, and we must never forget it!
For we can't begin a spiritual journey on a negative foundation.

The footings of our spiritual life cannot be founded upon FEAR.
The footings of our spiritual life cannot be founded upon EARNING that loving gaze.
The footings of our spiritual life must be founded on TRUST that it is the GOD OF LOVE AND GRACE who meets us and claims us in the waters and calls us BELOVED.

"If we...seek God out of fear or guilt or shame," writes Richard Rohr, "we won't go very far. If we start negative, we stay negative. We have to begin positive—by a wonderful experience, by something that's larger than life, by something that dips us into the depths of our own being. That's what the word baptism means, 'to be dipped into.'"¹

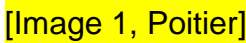
Father Rohr, who spent 14 years as a chaplain in Albuquerque jails, continues:


"I am convinced that the reason people make great mistakes is because they have never heard what Jesus heard on the day of his baptism. They never heard another human voice, much less a voice from heaven, say to them, 'You are a beloved son. You are a beloved daughter and in you I am well pleased.'

"If we've never had anyone believe in us, take delight in us, affirm us, call us beloved," Rohr says, "we don't have anywhere to begin... so we spend our whole lives trying to say those words to ourselves: 'I'm okay, I'm wonderful, I'm great.' But we don't really believe it..."

"Our jails are filled to over-flowing with people who never heard this foundational message—and sadly, so is much of our world."

¹ Adapted from Richard Rohr, *You Must Start with Something Positive Homily*. January 11, 2015

Actor Sidney Poitier,  who died Friday at age 94, grew up in poverty on a Cat Island tomato farm in the Bahamas.

The youngest of nine, he wore clothes made of flower sacks and never saw a car, looked in a mirror or tasted ice cream until his father moved the family to Nassau when he was 10. 

When he was 12, he quit school and began getting into mischief, so his parents sent him to live with an older married brother in Miami. But less than a year later he fled the Jim Crow south for New York and took jobs working as a dishwasher and ditch digger.²

After working as an orderly in a veterans hospital during the war, Poitier was drawn to acting, but, with only a few years of education, he was poor reader and found himself washing dishes once again, this time at a restaurant in Queens.

It was there, while on break from shifts, sitting with a newspaper in hand and trying to better learn how to read, that he met someone who took an interest in him and changed his life.

“I sit there, and I’m reading one of the papers,” Poitier later recalled,³ “and there was a Jewish waiter sitting at the table, [an] elderly man, and he saw me there. He got up, and he walked over, and he stood by the table that’s next to the kitchen, and he said, ‘Hi. What’s new in the papers?’ And I said to him, ‘I can’t tell you what’s new in the papers because I don’t read very well. I didn’t have very much of an education.’”

How did the man respond? He offered to read with Poitier.

“Every night after that,” said Poitier, “he would come over and sit with me, and he would teach me what a comma is and why it exists, what periods are, what colons are, what dashes are. He would teach me that there are syllables and how to differentiate them in a single word and consequently, learn how to pronounce them. Every night.”⁴

**Now, did that elder Jewish waiter tell Sidney Poitier,
“YOU ARE A BELOVED CHILD OF GOD.”? Unlikely.**

**But his actions told young Sidney, YOU MATTER. YOU HAVE WORTH.
YOUR ASPIRATIONS ARE WORTHY OF MY TIME AND ATTENTION.**

² William Grimes, *New York Times*. Printed in *Seattle Times*, January 8, 2022.

³ Podcast “*What it Takes*.” Referenced in *The Jewish Mentor Sidney Poitier Never Got to Thank*, by PJ Grisar. *Forward Magazine*, January 7, 2022.

<https://forward.com/culture/480495/sidney-poitier-dead-jewish-read-heat-of-the-night-civil-rights-coming-to/>

⁴ *Ibid*.

“One of my great regrets in life,” Poitier often said later, **“is that I went on to be a very successful actor, and one day I tried to find [the man], but it was too late. And I regret that I never had the opportunity to really thank him.”**

THIS, dear friends, is OUR CALL – each one of us who’ve waded in the waters of baptism—who have experienced God calling us BELOVED...

To look into the eyes and lives of the people around us, young and old, look into one another’s eyes, and to say YOU MATTER.

To show, with our actions, YOU ARE PRECIOUS.

At his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus heard those words, and they penetrated his soul to the marrow.

And he spent his brief years of ministry telling those who had never heard such words, who had never experienced such welcome, that they, too, were worthy of love—not only HIS love, but GOD’S.

Your voice, mine, are the voices that now must ECHO to one another what Jesus heard as he stood in the Jordan.

There is nothing more important than sharing that message and showing others that they matter—to us and God.

As Jesus begins his public ministry with that DIVINE VOICE still ringing in his ears, it is clear that LOVE, not judgment, is what motivated God to take on flesh in Jesus and join us on this journey.

And it is LOVE, not judgement, that’s at the center of Jesus’ mission in the world.

From his baptism onward, Jesus shows us that his mission is about removing anything that would obscure God’s sacred image in us; anything that would get in the way of us seeing ourselves, one another, and this God-infused creation as sacred, precious, beloved.

Let us pray. In the waters of baptism you call our names and name us BELOVED. By your Spirit, help that truth to gain traction in our lives.

On whatever roads we travel, in whatever circumstances we face, help us never to forget what Jesus shows us in his life, death and resurrection: that we are precious in your sight, honored, and loved. Amen.