

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Baptism of our Lord
January 13, 2019
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
With you I am well pleased

—Luke 3:15-16, 21, 22

I want you to think about the things you do to fuel and feed your desire for approval and acceptance. The fact is we want others to think well of us. We want them to like us. We want people's approval, and we want their acceptance. This is so fundamental to our human existence that we act in subconscious ways all the time to interact with people around us in society in ways that make us acceptable. You got cleaned up this morning before you came to church. You put on clothes that make you presentable. Nobody wants people to shun them because they smell like a combination of sweat and sewage. Most of us are self-aware enough that we don't want other people to think we're weird. To attain that acceptance we're willing to conform to the expectations of those around us. We act subconsciously in ways that are culturally and socially appropriate to our surroundings.

But that's just our subtle, subconscious behavior; our desire for approval goes much further. Why do we give out trophies to winning teams? Why do we crave recognition for a job well done? Why does it mean so much when the boss tells you how much he or she appreciates your contribution to the organization? Why is it such a feather in your cap when your coworkers choose you to represent them, or management selects you for a promotion? Why can a simple, passing compliment just make our day—you look nice today; good job on that presentation; awesome rebound? Why do you blush but secretly appreciate when people recognize your talents—you have such a beautiful voice; you're so gifted musically; I admire your decorator's touch—I love what you've done with the place; wow, you can really draw! Why does it mean so much to get the highest grade on the test, to sink the winning basket, to be the homecoming queen? Those accolades feed our desire for recognition, approval and acceptance. Why will we go fishing for compliments? Why will we subtly let others know what we've done for them lately or even overtly brag about our accomplishments? Usually those are symptoms of insecurity, when we're not getting the strokes we crave or the approval we desire.

I should point out: the desire for approval and acceptance is not inherently a bad thing. An example is our desire for approval in our homes. Children need to know they are loved and accepted by their parents, and parents don't want their children to think they're clueless, out of touch or weird. Being a well-adjusted, healthy human being depends to a certain degree on the acceptance of others. It is not a good thing if you're always being harshly criticized, always being put down. How would you feel if you were always being told: You're ugly; you're an idiot; you're incompetent; you can't do anything right; you're so strange. That's horrible and hurtful and terribly destructive. I could go on and on, because it impacts so much of our thinking, our emotional well-being and our lives: the need for approval, the desire for acceptance.

Oh, and don't tell me that you're not that way. "I don't care what other people think about me; I march to the beat of my own drum; I'm a countercultural nonconformist." Maybe to a point. But usually it just means you find your approval and acceptance from different people and in other ways.

But what about the ultimate in acceptance and approval? I'm talking about being acceptable to God, having God's complete approval. That's the holy grail of acceptance, the ultimate in approval, to have God himself say, "I accept you. I approve of you and everything you've done. Well done! Good job! With you I am well pleased!" Finally, our identity, our ultimate well-being, our emotional and spiritual health, the meaning and purpose of our lives and our final eternal destination all hinge on God's acceptance and approval. In the end it's the only thing that matters. If the whole world thinks you're awesome and cool and successful, but God casts you away into outer darkness and eternal fire, that's horrible. If the whole world rejects you and writes you off, but God says he loves you, approves you and accepts you, that's golden.

So how do we gain acceptance and find approval from God Almighty? We can find the answer to that question by listening to John the Baptist. Now, John the Baptist wasn't exactly mainstream. Wearing camel-hair clothing and eating locusts and wild honey for dinner probably didn't make him welcome in most social circles. His message was countercultural, but it was true. He told people to produce fruit in keeping with repentance, to grieve over and turn away from their sins, to quit running and hiding and pretending with God. And he pointed people to Jesus, the ultimate judge who would sift the wheat from the chaff. He said, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

You will never achieve acceptance from God based on your performance. What you do is not going to earn God's approval. The way you act is not going to win God's acceptance. If our behavior and our accomplishments could

score points with God, we could stand in the judgment and we could boast about the great acts of charity and philanthropy we've done, we could tick off the list of all our good deeds, and God would say, "Way to go! You are just one awesome human being, who deserves to be in heaven. I'm so pleased you've done all those things! Come on in!" But you know that's not what your life and behavior have deserved. What does God see when he looks at your life? God is holy and perfect. God doesn't just look at your outward façade of goodness. He sees our inmost thoughts. Our evil desires are spread out before him like a book. Our egotistical self-centeredness, our unholy attitudes, our mean and spiteful resentments—they're all spelled out before him on the page. He sees them all. If God were to shine the light of truth on your life, would he conclude, "With you I am well-pleased"? The answer based on our performance is no. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account. And for those who have counted on their best efforts to win God's approval on that day there will be only sheer terror to find that there is nothing but a lake of fire, everlasting suffering for a debt of sin that can never be repaid, when the Judge burns up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

So how do we become acceptable to God? Well, there is one who earned God's perfect approval. His name is Jesus Christ, and he is the very Son of the Father. He came to the bank of the Jordan River one day and asked to be baptized. It seemed like a strange request. John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; Jesus didn't need to repent, and he didn't have any sins to forgive. When Jesus presented himself at the Jordan River that day he had already been on this earth for about thirty years. He had lived thirty years of perfect obedience, perfect love, perfect selflessness, perfect submission to his parents. He had kept every little stroke of the pen written in the Old Testament Scripture. He came to fulfill all righteousness, as the righteous substitute for every human being, for every sinner of all time. He came to the bank of the Jordan River, and he stood there for you, as your proxy, and as he was baptized as your stand-in, his Father in heaven placed his stamp of approval on him, anointed him with the Holy Spirit, and publicly declared, "This is my Son whom I love. With him I am well pleased."

This is the Son who was baptized for you. This is the Savior who was obedient for you. This is the Holy One who was righteous for you. Everything he did was for you, so that in him, trusting in him, holding to him in faith, you could be acceptable and pleasing to God.

Today we remember and celebrate Jesus' baptism, and as we remember Jesus' baptism at the Jordan River, it's a good time for us to remember our baptism. "When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously" (Titus 3). There was a day when you were baptized into Christ, and anyone who has been baptized into Christ has been clothed with Christ. Your baptism is about God's acceptance. At your baptism God caused you to be reborn, reborn into a new family, the family of God. He dressed you up in garments of righteousness earned for you by Jesus himself, and he placed his holy name on you—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At your baptism you received God's unconditional approval in Christ, and you were accepted with the unconditional love of your heavenly Father, for Jesus' sake. All this God did for you when he washed you with water and his Word, forgave you your sins, and clothed you with Christ. At your baptism God said, "You are my son, you are my daughter, whom I love. With you I am well pleased!"

You might not be sure of where you stand with other people, whether they like you and accept you. You might feel insecure about whether you have the approval of your peers or your boss. You might never score the winning basket, get the highest grade or be the homecoming queen. In fact, in this world people may just scorn, despise and write you off as weird just because you follow Jesus. But you need never doubt where you stand with God. That's the ultimate approval, to be accepted by God Almighty and welcome in your heavenly Father's house. Your baptism is about acceptance. Cherish your identity as a baptized child of God in Christ: You are God's child. With you he is well pleased for Jesus' sake. Amen.