

Father O'Connor's Homily for 12 January 2025
Feast of the Baptism of the Lord-C

Isaiah 40: 1-5, 9-11
Titus 2: 11-14; 3: 4-7
Luke 3: 15-16, 21-22

Harriet Beecher Stowe [1811-1896], the author of **Uncle Tom's Cabin**, wrote about a positive experience she had in high school that was greater than any praise the critics could offer her. The assignment was given to the seniors to write an essay, the best of which would be read at their graduation.

The winning essay was read and the audience applauded. Then the name of the author was revealed, and it was Harriet. When she looked out into the audience and saw her father's face, it was the greatest gift she could ever imagine: seeing the pride, the love and the affirmation of her dad.

We all deeply desire to be wanted, loved and affirmed. And on this Sunday, which brings the Christmas season to a close, we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

Jesus is baptized by His cousin, John the Baptist, in the Jordan River. And "heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased.'" What a beautiful affirmation for Jesus to hear from His heavenly Father

The messages we hear and internalize do have an effect on the ways that we live our lives.

One boy was born in Eastern Europe in 1892, and another boy was born in Illinois in 1895. Both of them were Catholics and both of them were altar servers. And both of them dropped and broke a cruet of altar wine during Mass that splattered all over the place.

The boy in Eastern Europe was scolded by his priest: "You clumsy oaf! Get out of this sanctuary! You will never serve Mass here again!"

The boy in Illinois heard this from his priest: "Don't worry. Accidents happen. Someday you will be a great priest of God."

The first boy eventually lost his faith and became a Communist and the dictator of Yugoslavia named Tito. The second boy did become a priest and we know him as Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen.

Now that is not to say that one accident with a wine cruet fundamentally shaped both of those boys. But it is to say that the messages we hear and

internalize do have an effect, and some of them lasting, on the ways that we live our lives.

The painter Pablo Picasso said that when he was young his mother used to tell him: “Pablo, if you join the army, I know that you will eventually become a general. And if you become a monk, I know that you will eventually become the pope.”

And Picasso added: “So I became an artist, and eventually became Picasso!” No self-image problems there! But he gave his mother’s words of belief in him a lot of credit for his success.

We all need people who believe in us, no matter what our age. We all need to feel wanted and loved and affirmed.

And those of us who have an influence on younger people know how important it is to make a distinction between someone’s misbehavior and their essential worth as a person.

There was a mother of three small, energetic children. And someone asked her, after a very trying day, if she had it to do all over again, would she still have children?

Exasperated, she answered: “I certainly would. But not these.” Yes, it was work raising those youngsters. But it was worth it.

Another mother asked her pediatrician when she should best put her children to bed at night. And the doctor answered: “While you still have the strength.” Yes, it is work, but it is worth it.

And we make a distinction between a child’s misbehavior and a child’s worth as a person. There is a world of difference between saying, “You are a bad boy. You are a bad girl” – and saying, “What you did was a bad thing to do.”

The conductor Arturo Toscanini wondered his whole life if his mother really loved him. At the end of a concert, audiences would clap and cheer and rise to their feet. But he always wondered if his success brought any joy to his mother’s heart. He was never sure because she never showed it.

Another woman, with a painful upbringing, wrote that when her mother died, she actually felt quite relieved because “there was one less pair of cold eyes glaring at me in judgment.”

We all need to feel wanted, loved and affirmed. When we look at the cross, we see Jesus making a distinction between our sins, which are real – and our worth, which is also real. Even while still sinners, we are worth so much to God that He sent His beloved Son to be born and to die for us, so that we could live with God forever in heaven as His beloved sons and daughters.

A little girl was running around in the house and caused a vase to fall and break. That vase was a family heirloom. Her mother came into the room and the little girl expected her to be angry. But to her surprise her mother said: “Oh, honey, are you alright? I heard the crash and I was afraid that you were hurt.” And she realized that in her mother’s eyes – in spite of the broken vase – she was really the family’s treasure. Her mother’s affirming words that day, she never forgot.

We heard God the Father say at Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River: “You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased.” What a beautiful affirmation for Jesus to hear from His heavenly Father.

When we were baptized, God adopted each one of us into His family. And God still feels the same way about us. “You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter. With you I am well pleased.”

What a beautiful affirmation for us to hear from our heavenly Father.

What a beautiful affirmation for others to hear through us when, perhaps, they may really need it badly.

The lesson? We each have the power to make a difference in someone else’s life. Even something so simple as a dropped wine cruet or a broken vase can provide a memorable opportunity to help someone else feel wanted and loved and affirmed.

And the truth of the matter? We all really need to hear those messages regularly too.