

Defining Moment. According to Dictionary.com, a “defining moment” is a point at which the essential nature or character of a person or group is revealed or identified.¹ What have been the defining moments in your life?

In our Gospel lesson this morning, we read about a defining moment, the baptism of Jesus. I think it’s interesting that in the Gospel of Mark, there are no birth stories of Jesus like you would find in Matthew and Luke. Mark does not recite a cosmic pedigree of Christ that you find in John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Nor do you have a genealogy of Jesus’ ancestors going back to David, Abraham, and Adam like you find in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. No, apart from the simple opening statement in verse 1: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,” Mark doesn’t say anything about Jesus until verse 9: “At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”

In Mark’s telling of his Gospel, before Jesus’ baptism, he had no résumé, no recorded accomplishments, and no spiritual credentials. Being from Nazareth did not count as an accomplishment! In Mark, Jesus did not have to **do** anything or show his credentials in order to prove his identity. In Mark, Jesus just showed up at the river Jordan and be baptized by John. And as Jesus was raised from the waters, a divine voice of great power spoke the words of truth and life: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” These words have special significance for me. For you see, almost exactly two years ago, I announced my resignation as senior minister of University Baptist in Charlottesville. I don’t need to go into the details that factored into my decision – I mentioned a few of them in my sermon back in December 17 – but I can tell you that was a defining moment for me. I experienced a baptism, an immersion into the waters of chaos, swirling with uncertainty, and buffeted by waves of anxiety. I must confess that during those challenging days, I had fears that my resignation would define me in negative ways.

In the months after my resignation, I began to have an epiphany. Oh, it wasn’t like “Let there be light, and there was light,” kind of epiphany. It was more like the sun slowly rising in the dawn, as light gradually pushed away the darkness covering the horizon. What I’ve come to realize is this. It is one thing to fail; we all fail. But that doesn’t mean that we *are* a failure. It is one thing to be tired and to decide to stop doing something. But that doesn’t mean that we *are* weak or a quitter. It is one thing to go through a trauma. But that experience doesn’t have to define us as damaged goods, unworthy of love. I realized that the same defining voice that Jesus heard at his baptism also applied to me as a result of my baptism: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” God was saying to me: “You are loved and loveable, regardless of your resume, your accomplishments, your credentials . . . or lack thereof.” That was my epiphany.

Recently, I read a wonderful book by Brené Brown called *Daring Greatly*. In the book, she shared a story of her daughter Ellen who was distraught and crying when Brené picked her up from swim practice one day. The girl’s coach had assigned her to swim the 100 meter breaststroke for the weekend’s meet.

Ellen told her mother: “I can’t swim breaststroke. I’m terrible. I begged Coach not to put me in that event. Please, Mom. Please help me get out of it.”

¹ “defining moment.” *Dictionary.com Unabridged* (v 1.1). Random House, Inc. <Dictionary.com [http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/defining moment](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/defining+moment)>.

Later that evening, Brené and her husband Steve spent an hour debating the issue and finally agreed that Ellen would have to take it up with her coach. If he wanted her to swim that race, she needed to swim it. As right as the decision felt, Brené hated every minute of it.

Ellen was upset when her parents told her their decision, and even more upset when she came home from practice to report that her coach still wanted her to swim the event. Ellen folded her arms on the table, put her head down, and cried. She then said, “I won’t win. I’m still going to be swimming when all the other girls are getting out of the pool. Everyone is going to be watching.”

Brené realized that this was the opportunity to redefine what was important. She figured it was a chance to make their family culture of daring greatly more influential than the swim meet, her friends, and the ultracompetitive sports culture that is rampant in our community.

Brené said, “You can scratch that event. If I were you, I’d probably consider that option. But what if your goal for that race isn’t to win or even to get out of the water at the same time as the other girls? What if your goal is to show up and get wet?”

Ellen looked at her mom as if she was crazy. “Just show up and get in the water?”

Brené explained that she herself had spent many years never trying anything that she wasn’t already good at doing, and how those years of playing it safe almost made her forget how to be brave.

Brené said, “Sometimes the bravest and most important thing you can do is just show up.”

On the day of the meet, Ellen showed up, but she did not win. In fact, she was the last one out of the pool. The other swimmers had already left the deck, and there were girls standing on the blocks ready for the next heat. Brené and Steve cheered the entire time. When Ellen got out of the pool, she walked over to her coach, who gave her a hug and then made a suggestion about her kick. When she finally made her way to her parents, she was smiling and a little tearful. She announced, “That was pretty bad, but I did it. I showed up and I got wet. I was brave.”

Brené and Steve Brown wrote a parenting manifesto for their children that begins with this sentence, “Above all else, I want you to know that you are loved and lovable.”²

This Sunday, our lectionary texts remind me that in the eyes of God, my worth is not defined by my performance. All this week, while I was sick in bed, I was a little anxious about this Sunday. I wasn’t sure whether I was able to preach, and if I were, I knew that I probably couldn’t bring my “A” game. But then I had an epiphany. I’ve realized that I am already loved ... by God first of all ... and also by you. I just need to show up. And I felt my anxieties ease.

As Christians, baptized into the faith by whatever method or mode, we have already been defined by the One who created us, who loves us...as individuals and as a church. Therefore, we are called to show up for each other – in our families, in our work, in our community – fully, authentically, and yes, imperfectly. But that’s OK. Actually, that’s more than OK. Because of our baptisms, we are secure in knowing that, like Jesus, we too are beloved children of God.

That’s the kind of epiphany I want to live into as we begin the new year. May today be that kind of defining moment for us. Amen.

² Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*, pps. 240-244