

SERMON:

“The Rock”

Rev. J. Montgomery Brown

I am so pleased and gratified to be invited to share with this Church in this wonderful celebration. My wife, Jane grew up in this church. Her aunt Barbara still attends here. Jane’s sister Cathy was married in this church, back in _____, by the Rev’d Wayne Ransom, who served here from 1961-67. (My paths crossed later with him, when his daughter was a member of my last congregation – in Barboursville. And after Rev’d Ransom went home with Jesus, his daughter gave me his preaching robe, which I still have.)

I asked myself why I was invited to preach on this very special Sunday. I was pretty sure that it was because of the relationship I have shared over the years with your pastor, Bill Haynes. Bill took me under his wing, during my first appointment after seminary, in Wood County. In fact, he even suffered through reading all my materials for ordination, to critique and improve them. He has been a trusted friend for twenty years.

Someone said that it is perhaps because I was selected by our Conference to be the candidate for Bishop in the upcoming elections at Jurisdictional Conference. Because, you know, when Beverly Hills had a REAL bishop (Lloyd C. Wicke) preach, back on March 15, 1959 – for the dedication of the new West Addition -- there was a record attendance of 540 people. Maybe a candidate for bishop could get a good number.

My wife, however, stumbled upon what I now believe is the correct answer. She said that she grew up in this church, and the folks who knew her in her childhood and teenage years simply wanted to see if she married “up” or “down.” Forget about Bishop Lloyd C. Wicke’s 1959 sermon, THAT puts some serious pressure on me!

Whatever the reason, I’ve got to tell you that I am most honored. This is a special day in the life of this Church that VERY FEW churches ever get to celebrate.

Let's look at our scriptures we heard today:

When Jesus was baptized, He established how **CHRISTIAN BAPTISM is no longer the same**. No longer was it just about repentance - as had been the baptism that John the Baptist was offering in the Jordan River. Jesus had nothing for which to repent. No, He was the new prototype - showing us that Baptism is about Identity. What was spoken at Jesus' Baptism is what God says at **each of our baptisms - you ARE my beloved child with whom I am well pleased**. Can we grasp what a difference that makes?

Janet Wolf, one of our very gifted United Methodist storytellers told a story that has helped me understand this:

In a world that pronounces so many of us "not good enough," what might it mean to believe that we really are chosen, precious, and beloved? In a new members' class, we talked about baptism: this holy moment when we are named by God's grace with such power it won't come undone.

Fayette was there - a woman living on the streets, struggling with mental illness and lupus. She loved the part about baptism and would ask over and over, *"And when I'm baptized, I am ...?"* We soon learned to respond, *"Beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold."* *"Oh, yes!"* she'd say, and then we could go back to our discussion.

The big day came. Fayette went under, came up spluttering, and cried, *"And now I am ...?"* And we all sang, *beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold* *"Oh, yes!"* she shouted as she danced all around the fellowship hall.

Two months later I got a call. Fayette had been beaten and raped and was at the county hospital. So I went. I could see her from a distance, pacing back and forth. When I got to the door, I heard, *"I am beloved ..."* She turned, saw me, and said, *"I am beloved, precious child of God, and*

..." Catching sight of herself in the mirror - hair sticking up, blood and tears streaking her face, dress torn, dirty and rebuttoned askew, she started again, *"I am beloved child of God, precious and ..."* She looked in the mirror again and declared *"... and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I'll be so beautiful I'll take your breath away!"*

Our Baptism - the Jesus kind - is when we, too, receive that blessing - when the Voice from Heaven names us and claims us: *This is My Beloved Child in Whom I am well pleased.*

You see, in His Baptism, the sinless Savior showed us *what is INSIDE EACH ONE OF US* – each one of us who is lovingly made in the very image of God, how each one of us shares that same divine DNA with Jesus.

That is the ROCK SOLID CORE of our very being.

The *epistle lesson* told us that there are some people who claim the rock as their cornerstone. There are others, who will stumble over it.

Some people are able to claim what Jesus came
to show them,
to make them,
to empower them,
to believe –

beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold.

There are others who simply can't tolerate that notion – *No, no, I am bad, I am no good, I certainly am not good enough.* And for those who believe that bad news, they stumble over that same rock.

In the 16th chapter of Matthew, we have Peter who has finally got it – (and we know that for Peter, it tended to come and go. He would get it and then he would get mixed up and stumble over it. Back and forth. Get it, fall

down. Get it, fall down. Perhaps that's why WE like Peter so much, because he's so much like us.) But, in these few verses of the 16th chapter of Matthew, **Peter GOT IT**. And *Jesus told him what that was worth*.

When you get it, you become the ROCK upon which the Church is built.

Life is not always easy. But, indeed it is sometimes in our toughest times, when the ROCK is the most important, when the important stuff of life with Jesus really comes to the fore.

Back in the 1920's the new Walnut Hills Methodist Episcopal Church - around since its infancy on Christmas Day, 1910, through its formal chartering 100 years ago, on Easter 1912 – felt a calling to expand, to reach out, to share the good news with more people. They stepped out in faith, sold the old church building, bought the ground upon which we are presently seated, and began to build a new church.

Then came the Great Depression, and the church defaulted on its payments to the contractor and had to deed the property and the excavated hold in the ground to that contractor from Columbus, Ohio. Oh, that was bad.

Ah, but it wasn't just a hole in the ground. There was a Rock that was involved.

And when that same contractor was about to default on a loan it had with a bank in Columbus, there were FIVE MEN –

1. Roy Edwards
2. Lyle Hensley
3. V.H. Holley

4. A.F. Tucker, and

5. Claude Watts

who made a pledge of \$5.00/month ON TOP OF THEIR REGULAR CHURCH PLEDGE – to pay off that \$3,500 debt, and got the deed to the Church put back into the Church’s hands. That’s \$375 in today’s dollars. In the Great Depression, no less. This was sacrificial giving.

But it was more than that – it was recognition **of value still yet to be revealed.** That’s how **beloved children of God, precious and beautiful to behold** respond to life – **NOT ON** the basis of what’s going on around them – **BUT ON** the basis of **who they are, what they are,** and **the value yet to be revealed.**

And they stuck to it. The people of the Church became the new contractors, including even the pastor, the Rev’d Elvin Hinerman, who rolled up his sleeves and did construction work (he hadn’t always been a preacher, but had been a long time teacher at the Huntington East Trade School.) And they built that church. And while they were doing it, Joyce Chandler Gold remembers how they had to walk on wood planks down the aisle between the pews in the basement sanctuary, because of all the rain water that poured in through the tar paper roof.

But, by Easter Day, 1936, the first worship was held in the sanctuary above ground.

Let me tell you something that did not happen.

When those hard and dark days came, the people of this Church did not go moping around, sounding like Eeyore from Winnie-the-Pooh book, **“Oh, woe are we; we are no good. We just can’t get it done.”**

Nooo! They had this ROCK. They knew that they were indeed what Jesus showed them in their baptism: **WE ARE BELOVED CHILDREN OF**

GOD, PRECIOUS AND BEAUTIFUL TO BEHOLD. And we've got a church to build so that we can let other people know this GOOD NEWS.

When you are a **beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold**, you not only know that you are the ROCK upon which God will build His Church – you also realize that you are a **ROYAL PEOPLE – brother and sister of Jesus Himself.**

ROYAL PEOPLE don't just roll over and play dead. Prince William knew from the time he was a small child that when he got married, it would be a great a memorable day – even before he knew who or when he would marry. ROYAL PEOPLE can do things on the basis of the basis of **who they are, what they are, and the value yet to be revealed**

[Story of PPRC Chair in other part of state, who wrestled with some demons from her childhood.] She confided in her pastor that she was going to counseling to deal with some of these issues. The counselor was using a new kind of therapy known as EMDR. Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a comprehensive, integrative psychotherapy approach using elements of many effective different forms of psychotherapy. EMDR is an information processing therapy and uses an eight phase approach to address the experiential contributors of a wide range of pathologies

At one of these stages, the woman told her pastor, she was supposed to lift up a new interior identity to replace the one foisted upon her in a toxic childhood. The therapist told her to come up with an image. The pastor – who understood the Baptism of Jesus as I've explained it today – had often told this parishioner about the identity we are given in Christian Baptism: **beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold.** She reported to her pastor not only that the therapy is bearing good fruit, and she is beginning to re-claim an abundant life; she also said

that the psychotherapist asked her for permission to give to other patients that same image to hold: ***beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold.***

When you are a ***beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold***, you also realize that you are part of a ROYAL FAMILY – brother and sister of Jesus Himself.

ROYAL PEOPLE don't just roll over and play dead. ROYAL PEOPLE can do things on the basis of the basis of **who they are, what they are,** and **the value yet to be revealed.** They have a ROCK upon which all life can be grounded and empowered.

Just two weeks ago, when Bishop Grove announced the result of the voting at our last Annual Conference in which I was nominated as West Virginia's candidate for bishop, he asked me to come forward and kneel at the Altar Rail before the whole Annual Conference, while he had prayer.

He invited folks from the church I pastor to come forward and lay hands on me, and he asked everyone in Wesley Chapel to stand and hold out their hands in blessing, while he prayed. And he said:

Holy and gracious God, Conference has made a decision and we receive that decision with joy. And we ask that you would bless Monty Brown with Your grace and with Your peace and comfort; and that You would keep him centered in You in these coming weeks. We pray for Jane and for their family, and for all of those who love Monty.

And we pray for those throughout the jurisdiction who are being endorsed and nominated in other conferences, and for the coming of all of our brothers and sisters, who are coming from this part of Your Church to Charleston, that when we make choices here, we may be led by Your Spirit and encouraged by Your Grace, and through it all Monty Brown may know that he is ***a beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold.***
Amen.

What that prayer meant is that it doesn't matter whether Monty Brown gets elected Bishop, or not, because he's part of a ROYAL FAMILY – brother and sister of Jesus Himself.

ROYAL PEOPLE do things on the basis of the basis of **who they are**, **what they are**, and **the value yet to be revealed**. They have a ROCK upon which all life can be grounded and empowered.

For the past 100 years, the people of Walnut Hills ME Church, later Beverly Hills United Methodist Church, have faced all kinds of life situations – some low and some high. There have been lean years and there have been bountiful years. But in all times, and in all ministries, the people of this Church have known that they are **beloved children of God, precious and beautiful to behold**.

The people of this Church know that they are part of a ROYAL FAMILY – brother and sister of Jesus Himself.

ROYAL PEOPLE do things on the basis of the basis of **who they are**, **what they are**, and **the value yet to be revealed**. They have a ROCK upon which all life can be grounded and empowered.

These first hundred years are just the beginning! There are people all around here who have been told by so many people, and by so many parts of our culture that their name is NOT GOOD ENOUGH. But, so long as the people of this Church live out their Baptismal vows, they are going to be sharing good news that says what the world has to say is wrong.

The next hundred years – I don't know what they will contain – but I do know this: You have a destiny that is yet to be revealed, which is based on **who you are** and **what you are: beloved children of God, precious and beautiful to behold**. The royalty of this Church Family will not be kept a secret. It can't be, because you have been blessed to be a blessing.

Thanks be to God for this precious legacy, for **this wonderful day**, and for **the outstanding future yet to be revealed**. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.