

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church
14 January 2018
Evensong for Epiphany (Mark 1:4-11)

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Ah, yes. Close your eyes and imagine the scene. Jesus is, oh, perhaps waist deep in the River Jordan. He probably has a cloth draped over his body for modesty. John the Baptizer, his cousin, is in the water with him. John places his hand on Jesus' forehead; perhaps he says a short prayer. Then he leans Jesus back, down into the water. Jesus comes up spluttering, wiping the water from his eyes and as he looked up he saw the clouds part and a dove coming down from the heavens and there's a voice. “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

I wonder if he thought, “Uh oh, I'm in deep water now.”

Because from that moment on Jesus was to journey through the most amazing ministry. Over the next three or so years he would heal the sick, feed thousands of people with a bit of bread and fish, walk on water, raise his friend Lazarus from the dead, give sight to a blind man, stand up for a woman accused of adultery, and – well, the list is really quite lengthy.

It is too easy to be distracted by the signs and wonders performed by Jesus, and to miss the main event: This Jesus is the unique child of God and he was with us such a short time to remind us, to compel us to understand, that God's love, God's mercy, God's forgiveness is available to all. To remind us that we just have two quite simple commandments: Love God, love our neighbor.

He didn't give us many rules but this: Love God, love our neighbor.

Of course, it was the miracles, the signs, the wonders that got people all worked up, including his enemies. But the overarching message (love God, love our neighbor) was what endured and what will endure, to the end of time.

We, too, get all worked up over following the rules. Do this, don't do that. We see the trees but not the forest, forgetting the overlying context.

And so we mess up. We place restrictions on God's love, God's mercy, God's forgiveness. We try to put God-in-Christ in a tidy little box, blond and looking so serene, and we think, “Oh, Jesus wants me to do this. Uh-oh, Jesus said I shouldn't do that.” When it all comes down to two simple commandments: Love God, love your neighbor.

Well, I suggest to you: God is much bigger than that little box you've made for him. God's love knows no such restrictions. God's love is immeasurable, beyond all time, beyond all space, and that's pretty hard to wrap our heads around.

But I do believe it is true.

The God of our precious little understanding is *beyond* our understanding. It can only come down to one thing: God is love.

And if we focus on that, the little stuff, all those rules and restrictions, will vanish.

And if we focus on loving God and loving our neighbor, all the rules and doctrines and churchly admonishments will vanish as well.

Because there just isn't anything quite so profound yet quite so simple. We don't need to overthink God – we need to love God. We don't need to box our neighbors in, “This one is OK, that one's a bit off” – we just need to love our neighbor. Especially the one who doesn't look like us.

And God's love, God's mercy, God's justice will flow like living water and we will be at peace.

Amen.