

I have some Good News! I've got VIP Tickets to a big event that's happening later today. Does everyone know what I'm talking about? It's a match-up between a good side and a bad side. I don't know if you know this, but the good side is going to win, even though it may not always seem like it. The bad side is definitely going to lose, even though sometimes it looks like they have the upper hand. You know what I'm talking about right? Good.

Well, it's pretty neat that I have these extra special, VIP Tickets right? They're definitely something only a hometown hero could get right? Someone with connections. Someone who "knows somebody." Exactly. Pretty impressive huh? Makes you feel special, right?

Anybody want one? It'd be awesome to see the good side win right? Totally. Well, that's true, but there's a catch. There's something you need to know before you get this ticket. Here's the catch: This ticket doesn't cost anything, you don't have to do anything to get one, and there is an infinite number of them and an infinite number of seats at this big event. Not so bad huh?

Ok. So are you ready for your tickets? Let's see here...

"VIP Ticket to the Holy Bowl: The Baptism of Hudson Daniel Brown"

That's right! The big event happening later today is a baptism. Yes, there's another big event happening tonight that many of us will watch. That event might end with Bill Belichick being "baptized" with Gatorade, but tomorrow's/today's baptism by water in the Holy Bowl, or Baptismal Font, is *really* much more important.

In baptism, we name that there is good in this world and there is bad. The good is God's love and the bad is the stuff that takes us away from God's love. The parents and godparents will say that they renounce those bad forces and that they will turn away from them and turn towards the love of God. Anyone who was baptized has made those promises (or they were made on their behalf) and the Christian life is all about living into them, more and more, one day at a time, with God's help. Those promises and the rest of the Baptismal Covenant show us how to live now that we've been baptized by water and been anointed by the Holy Spirit. They tell us how to take this Love that we find in baptism and share it with the whole world.

That's exactly what's going on in today's gospel reading. Jesus has just been baptized and now he's proclaiming that his ministry is to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind. The folks in his synagogue are happy to hear it. They're excited for this hometown hero to bring some good news to them. It makes them feel like VIP Ticketholders. But then he says that it's not just for them, the chosen few, but this good news is even for "outsiders," the folks beyond the borders, the Gentiles. When they hear that, they go from amazement to rage in an instant and even try to push him off a cliff.

That seems pretty crazy, but it's not really that much of a stretch to imagine. How often are we glad to hear about something great happening for us or our group, but then when we learn that it's meant for all, it loses its luster, or even makes us mad that others who aren't "worthy," or aren't "cool enough," or aren't the "right kind of" -- fill in the blank, it makes us mad that

they have access to something that should really just be for us, who deserve it. Or so we think.

We can see the reverse of this everywhere. Just look at the Super Bowl ads! Yes some are funny or clever. But they are all, in a sense, saying “Here’s a product or service that you *don’t* have and that you are *not* complete without. If you buy said product or use said service, you will be happy and fulfilled.” Now, I’m not against the creation and sale of goods and services that add value to our lives, but I am against the underlying assumption that we are not complete without x y or z and that if only we had x y or z we would be whole, or cool, or part of the in-group, and therefore, happy and fulfilled.

What really makes us feel whole? It’s not having something that other people don’t. In fact, it’s just the opposite. It’s giving away what we have received from God--that is, God’s love--that makes us happy. It’s sharing in a common meal with other broken people who don’t deserve it just as much as we don’t deserve it, and yet are invited and welcome, whoever we are, just as we are. It’s giving away food and clothing to folks who need it, knowing that in the blink of an eye, we could be on the other side of the table and would want the same love to be shown to us. And, most importantly, I think, we know wholeness and fulfillment not by buying the latest gadget, but by knowing more deeply *who* we are and *whose* we are as beloved children of God.

Like Jeremiah and the psalmist from today’s readings, God has known each of us from when we were in our mother’s womb. God knows us and

loves, warts and all, newest iPhone or not. And God's love remains, even when we try to hoard it or exclude others from it for fear that it will run out. Well, it won't run out. It's not a scarce resource. God's love for us makes us God's beloved children, known through and through. And that Love is patient and kind. It's not envious or arrogant or boastful or rude. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, and it never ends. And God's love knows no boundaries. God doesn't care if we're rich or poor, black or white, wise or foolish, Pats fans or Rams fans. None of those external things make any difference when it comes to how much God knows and loves us.

When you really think about it, that kind of love is a little scary, because it goes against all the ways that we try to earn love from one another and sadly, restrict love from others. And when we start to go deeper into that boundless love by growing spiritually, it can also be a little scary because we're so used to the shallower waters. This can happen on the individual level and the congregational level. All the work that's happening right now through the RenewalWorks program is helping us as individuals and as a congregation to prioritize spiritual growth and move us along the spiritual continuum. Whether you're exploring, growing, deepening, or centering, spiritual growth can feel uncomfortable because it challenges us to open our hearts and our lives wider and wider as we love ourselves, our neighbors, and God more and more. That process begins at baptism and never really ends because God's love never ends. But the growth can be uncomfortable. We

can go from amazement to rage very quickly as we are called to examine and amend our habits, our priorities, our bank accounts, really our whole lives.

And that brings me back to these VIP Tickets. These are for today's baptism, but the truth is, every day we wake up, we are offered a free ticket to God's love for that day. We can choose to not redeem it and go about our day on our own terms. Many of us have tried that and found it wanting. But when we use that ticket and share God's love with others, we do what Jesus did in the synagogue all those years ago--we live into our identity as God's beloved children, anointed by the Holy Spirit in baptism to proclaim the Good News, and to live lives that are filled with faith, with hope, and with love.

Amen.

