

As a kid growing up in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Larry Hoover, now 62, found himself in the middle of gang territory. He had the Lucianitos on one side and the West Siders on the other. On Friday nights he would fight with the Lucianitos and on Saturday with the West Siders. "It was part of growing up."

But his mother told him that if he didn't straighten himself out, he was going to end up in Springer, the local penitentiary for juveniles. "And, lo and behold, my mother was right," Hoover said. Thirty years later he went to Springer. Not as a gang banger but as a teacher. The correctional facility needed a graphic arts instructor and since he had his own print shop at the time, Hoover took the job.

When he taught at Springer there was no fence surrounding the grounds, but in the more than five years that he worked there, Hoover said he never had a kid escape. "We had some really, really tough little boys there," he said. When asked to share his secret to working with them, Hoover recalled, "I treated them like humans, even though what they did was wrong."

And his approach seems to have paid off. Not too long ago, Hoover got a phone call from one of the boys who had been there. The caller was one of Hoover's former students, Rudy. Rudy called to say that he was now the manager of his own print shop in El Paso, Texas. He was about to open another store and wanted to invite his old teacher to work for him.

Hoover laughed. "Oh, I'm retired now, no thanks." But according to Hoover, hearing from that former student was his reward. He taught him well.

This morning we have read of Jesus' baptism found within the gospel of Luke. Each of the four gospels treats the baptism of Jesus differently. In the gospel of Matthew, John the Baptist voices the concern, "I need to be baptized by you and you come to me?" which allows Jesus to explain why he needs to be baptized.

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In the gospel of John, the actual baptism is not narrated highlighting John's role as one who announces the coming of Jesus. And in Mark, the baptism of Jesus serves to identify who Jesus is.

But what really jumps out in this scene is how it all ends. The scene of Jesus' baptism ends with God the parental figure announcing to Jesus and to all around him, "this is my son. With you I am well pleased." And as I read these words this morning, it strikes me that these are words which we need to hear in our lives and these are the types of words of encouragement we need to be sharing with others.

As many of us know, there were several football bowl games played over the last couple of weeks. Lots of bowl games. Some were exciting and fun to watch and others not so much. I found myself critiquing the coaching as I observed it during the games that I watched. And there was one coach whose actions during a crisis period in the game caught my attention. The coach was Pat Fitzgerald of Northwestern University.

His quarterback was having an awful game having thrown lots of interceptions and his team was behind by a couple of touchdowns to Auburn. Fitzgerald called his players together. He told them. "Guys, you are doing great. We have been playing with only 10 players against their 12. Our quarterback has even been playing for them. But guess what, he is going to finish this game on our side. So we are in great shape." The quarterback went back out and played significantly better and although Northwestern lost the game in overtime, I am sure the Northwestern players and quarterback left that game with a great deal of respect for themselves and their coach.

None of us can imagine living the life that Jesus lived. None of us can truly realize the depth of pain and suffering that he encountered. But I wonder during those darkest of days when he cried out in anguish, I wonder if what kept him going during those crisis moments was recalling those powerful words spoken to him at his baptism. "You are my son. With you I am well pleased."

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So let's think about people in our lives that we encounter who need to hear those same words voiced to them as well. Think about the young adult who has a college degree but no job and is wondering if he is of value. Think about the young mother who gave up a lucrative profession to raise her children and is wondering if this was the right decision.

Think about the teenager who has bounced from one foster home to another and is craving for that adult to show an interest in them as a person and not as a problem. Think about that child or adult that you are responsible for in your life at home or in your profession or where you volunteer who is in a vulnerable time and whose life could take one of several paths.

Think about that older person who sits alone in a nursing home with no visitors during the day. Think about that person who sits in prison and is wondering what the next day holds.

It is folks like these who need to hear words through you that say to them, "you are a child of God and, therefore, you are special."

In his book *Craddock Stories*, celebrated preacher Fred Craddock tells of an evening when he and his wife were eating dinner in a little restaurant in the Smokey Mountains. A strange and elderly man came over to their table and introduced himself. "I am from around these parts," he said.

"My mother was not married, and the shame the community directed toward her was also directed toward me. Whenever I went to town with my mother, I could see people staring at us, making guesses about who my daddy was.

At school, I ate lunch alone. In my early teens, I began attending a little church but always left before church was over, because I was afraid somebody would ask me what a boy like me was doing in church. One day, before I could escape, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the minister.

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He looked closely at my face. I knew that he too was trying to guess who my father was. 'Well, boy, you are a child of. . .' and then he paused. When he spoke again he said, 'Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance.' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now, you go on and claim your inheritance.' I left church that day a different person," the now elderly man said. "In fact, that was the beginning of my life."

Dr. Craddock then asked the man, "What is your name?" The man answered, "Ben Hooper. My name is Ben Hooper." Dr. Craddock said he vaguely recalled from when he was a kid, his father talking about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected a fellow who had been born out of wedlock as the governor of their state. His name was Ben Hooper.

Sometime this week, I invite you to let someone hear these words, "You are child of God and, therefore, you are special." AMEN.

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-“A Changing Stay in Juvenile Detention,” Storycorp segment on NPR, January 8, 2010 and found at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=122319515>

-Adams, Joanna, “God Believes in You,” Day 1 broadcast for January 10, 2010, and found at [http://day1.org/1678-god\\_believes\\_in\\_you](http://day1.org/1678-god_believes_in_you)

-Text: Luke 3: 15-22

-Given: January 8, 2010

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