

One of the most important things, perhaps the single most important thing in our lives is love. And while it's not taught in a classroom, it is something that has to be learned.

Nancy Liedel is a woman who was an adopted child, and later in life became a mother who would adopt too.

She remembers being around the age of ten, and asking her mom a question: "Mom, do you love me as much as you would love a real kid?"

She asked that question at least once a week when she was ten. Her answer was always the same. "What makes you think you aren't real, Nancy?" That was followed by a long talk about how much she wants me, how she had seven premature babies who did not live, and that prior to the time they learned she was available for adoption, she was so depressed that they had tried drastic measures to help her smile again.

She assured Nancy that her life began, in many ways, the day they brought her home. She let her know, once again, that she was truly wanted, loved, cared about, and that she grew in her heart while Nancy grew in her birth mom's tummy. She gave her constant assurance that she was "real and wanted."

Yet, Nancy always wondered.

It's not that she thought that her mom was lying, exactly. But since she didn't have any living children of "her own," maybe she just didn't know how much she would love one of them compared to "stinky old me" as Nancy thought of herself.

She would like to have said that her childhood was perfect. That it was a fairy tale of toys and love and no punishments. That she was perfect. The reality is not tragic, just normal. Yes, her parents made mistakes, and of course, she was not perfect. She is sure there were days when they wondered what they had gotten themselves into. She knew there were certainly times she fantasized about the perfect parents, as many adopted kids do. She often pretended that the Captain and Tennille were her first parents and invited her to sing on their show and tour with them.

She was especially close to her mom, yet somewhere in the back of Nancy's mind, she always wondered was she loved as much as birth children were loved by their parents? Was she somehow missing out?

On a cold, rainy, horrible day in 1980, her mom crossed the street for the last time. Somehow, she did not see the car headed toward her. At only 16, Nancy didn't know if she would ever recover. Gone were all the things a young woman needs a mother for, the insight from someone who has been where she would be going.

Seventeen years later, she too, gave birth to a premature baby and, like her mother, lost him a short time after birth. She had buried her mother, and now the pain of losing a son. She was finally determined that she would probably never get pregnant again, let

alone carry a baby to term. The same condition that prevented her mother from having children plagued her. Her grief overwhelmed her. She wanted to talk to her mom and she did, but she longed for her replies. In the midst of that, Nancy and her husband like her parents applied for adoption.

She almost didn't pick up the phone that day. She was depressed because it was almost the anniversary of her son's due date. She was hiding. The call was normal until the woman at the agency asked, "why would I call you on a Saturday?"

It took a few moments to dawn on her that Saturday calls about adoption were rare unless there was a baby. She jumped up and down, elated and with her husband took a cab ride to South Chicago to meet the birth mom. She looked shyly as she placed her baby boy into the arms of Nancy. She did not know how to react. She didn't want to show the elation in the face of her obvious pain. Her heart bled for her, but it sores for herself. "He's so soft" was all she could say. She wanted everything out of her mouth to be perfect, to tell her how much she would love him, how they were naming him after her husband, and that they would cherish him. That moment was the most precious of her life. It changed them forever. When she placed Gene into her arms, she opened the entire universe for Nancy and her husband. She made all of their dreams come true.

Eventually Nancy became the mom of five boys, two adopted and two miracle birth children, born as early as some her mother's lost babies. Forty years of technological advances gave her babies the chance that her siblings did not have. Nancy knows a lot now. She knows that little boys like jokes about all sorts of disgusting things. She knows she has more patience than she dreamed, and she knows what pure love is.

Most of all, she knew the answer the day her oldest son came to her and asked, "do you love me as much as you love my brothers? The ones who grew in your tummy?"

"Yes, sweetheart, I do. I love you just as much as my mommy loved me" is the answer she gives her son.

While I'm not adopted, I've known a number of parents who have adopted children over the years. And in each case, they speak about their children with love, and you can see that the bond is deep, because to them, there is no difference in how their child came to be a part of their life, there is simply love, freely given.

This is what we celebrate on this feast of the Baptism of the Lord, namely also our own baptism, through which we are God's adopted sons and daughters.

The feast is seemingly an odd one to end the Christmas Season. Jesus is baptized as an adult, and himself he has no need of baptism. It's not like the baptism we have, as Jesus has no original sin, Jesus is not being incorporated into a Church, and Jesus has no past life to change from. Indeed, John baptizes people in the Jordan more as a cleansing ritual; a person in a sense beginning a new life, recognizing in the holy man of John the Baptizer that he is a prophet. They go into the river and emerge a new person,

and there's some symbolism of that too in Christian baptism in the white garment given to a person on their baptism, and the use of water. So, why is Jesus being baptized and what does that have to do with love?

Jesus has come into the world to redeem. And all of us are in need of redemption, because we share in what is called the effects of original sin. As such all of us can do good things, but all of us will be prone to make mistakes at times too. We are born into a dysfunctional world, and we need a means of redemption. We need a liberation. Jesus, through His sacrifice, makes us God's adopted sons and daughters, because through baptism we are grafted onto him. As Jesus says, it was not you who chose me but I who chose you. So when we are baptized, we are saying no longer does sin have the last word, Jesus does. This is why at the start of the baptism rite, we trace the sign of the cross on the forehead of the person to be baptized, and their name is stated. We are saying you are loved by Jesus, forever.

And what's so important with that is that it works just like love did with Nancy and her mom. To receive the love of God, there is no condition at all. We don't have to give God anything other than ourselves. As we hear in the second reading from Titus: *"When the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared, not because of any righteous deeds we had done but because of his mercy, He saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he richly poured out on us through Jesus Christ our savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in the hope of eternal life."* Nancy didn't need to do a thing to be loved by her mom unconditionally. If we think we have to do something to get God's love, we might think God is out to get us when we make a mistake or we deserve something when we do good deeds. Rather, God's sun (or Son) quite literally shines in the guilty and the innocent. So first and foremost, we must remember that Jesus chose us. That's why He is standing in line waiting his turn to be baptized; He stands with us. And through our own baptism, we are born again, claimed forever for God.

Love though isn't a one time thing. Over the course of her relationship with her mom, Nancy had her love re-affirmed time and time again through words and actions. And that's where the other sacraments and an ongoing relationship with our Church come in. Most of us probably do not remember our baptism day. But in the years that followed, we may remember our first reconciliation, our first communion, our confirmation day, or the day you were married. All of these sacraments are ways that love grows. Holy Communion brings us closer to Jesus where we are reminded of how much God is in love with us. Reconciliation is where we name the mistakes we made and hear the words "I absolve you of your sins" and "your sins are forgiven," again being reminded that no sin can keep God away. Confirmation gives us the strength of the Spirit and is where we renew our faith. And Marriage and Holy Orders are where we discern our life long vocations and each entail putting our life into a purpose. But all of these require the Church. For Nancy and her mom, there was the dynamics of their relationship and increased as the years went by, and eventually Nancy took the love she learned from her mom and passed it on to her own four children. Something to think about especially as we enter Ordinary Time is to make sure our own faith is an ongoing relationship with

God. This means that we make Mass a priority, and we pray each day, and teach this to others, especially kids. God loves us and does not need us to tell Him how great He is. Prayer and Mass and the Sacraments are all for our benefit. Sadly we can put so much emphasis on the things of the world and rank them ahead of God, so when you're tempted to skip Mass because of a traveling sports league or you're on vacation and it's a half hour drive to the closest Catholic church, or you're too tired to pray, don't. Make that effort, and get in the habit of spending time with God so you can grow closer to Him. Right after His baptism, Jesus goes off to pray, and just as our bodies need nutrition to grow and stay healthy so our souls need prayer and God's grace to thrive.

Lastly, as Jesus begins His mission shortly after His baptism, His mission is one we share in. As priests, prophets and kings, we are called to announce the Gospel of the Lord and to evangelize. Nancy's mom did that through her vocation as a mom, and then Nancy did it to herself. As we pray and celebrate the sacraments and grow closer to God, we can also do self-inventory on how we are living out the promises of our baptism. As life goes on, we need not wait until Lent each year to do that. As we pray, we ask for God's wisdom and strength to better live out our vocation and to proclaim His love through word and deed.

As we inevitably make mistakes as humans, sometimes part of us may, like Nancy, wonder if God still loves us as much as the "holy" people. The answer is always a resounding yes, for the words to us are the same words that we hear in the Gospel: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." We also must never forget love requires a response. We want God to show us how we made His love known with the time we were given on this earth. Jesus Baptism led Him to the Cross because He loved us that much. Wherever our own baptism leads us in life, Jesus will be with us - like Him, may we daily respond to that love by welcoming Him into our hearts not just at Christmas or when we have an emergency, but each and every day knowing that His love for us knows no limits, for we are all "real kids" to Him, loved without end.