

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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It's been a while since I saw a short film that I still remember today. The title: Validation. (by Kurt Koenne) In any case, I can only recommend that you watch this 15-minute movie - you can do that on YouTube. It's a very humorous movie that also makes you think.

So what is this movie about? The first scene takes us to a parking garage with a sign: '2 hours of free parking with validation' - two hours of free parking with proof that you have somehow made a transaction. Stamp on it, and good. We've all been there, haven't we?

Next scene: a sad and tired-looking man walks up to a counter behind which sits the guy who stamps the parking tickets. He pushes the ticket over to the guy and says absently: 'I am here to get validated. - I'm here to get validated'. Whereupon the person validating the parking tickets - his name is Hugh Newman, as we learn shortly afterwards - looks lovingly at the man and then says: 'You - you are awesome! - You - you are fantastic! You have an expressive face with such striking features. Has anyone ever told you that? To which the man, somewhat unsettled, replies: 'Um - no.'

In any case, the conversation between the two continues.

Hugh speaks words of encouragement to the man. And his expression slowly changes. It brightens. Finally, the man even smiles. Hugh has built him up. The kind words of affirmation have transformed him.

And of course he gets a Validation for his parking ticket.

Then more people are coming to Hugh to have their parking ticket validated, and then unexpectedly being validated as human. And that makes a difference - everyone is transformed.

The word about Hugh spreads - and soon people are parking in the parking garage just to be validated by Hugh. And you can see a long queue forming in front of the counter. Everyone wants to be acknowledged by Hugh - everyone is hungry to hear a kind word.

And even the anticipation of meeting Hugh is already transforming people: the people waiting are talking and laughing with each other.

At some point, the management becomes aware of this. And of course there are complaints that people don't come to the parking garage to do business, but just to see Hugh.

This becomes too much for the manager and he sends security to tell Hugh to do his job: simply confirm parking tickets, but nothing more.

After all, this is a business, not psychotherapy. But guess what happens next: Hugh starts to acknowledge the security staff.' Guys, you really have a tough job. I wouldn't want to do it. I can imagine that you don't always have it easy, and you don't get much recognition either...'

And so, the security officers are transformed. Finally, someone who shows understanding! They introduce Hugh to their boss, who is also taken with Hugh and his understanding words. And so on, and on. Hugh is even invited to the White House at some point to endorse the president (the movie was filmed during the time of George W. Bush).

The world is transformed by Hugh. A television program even reports about him: 'Hugh Newman - the man who changes the world by providing free parking - and free compliments'.

The story then develops even further, but I won't go into that now. Just watch it - you can find the movie on You Tube!

What I really like about this movie, this story, is the simple and impressive moral: it doesn't take much to give people courage.

We all like it when we experience recognition, right?

When we find validation. We all have something to offer, something to share. We are all worth something. And it's good that we are reminded of this from time to time - because we already experience a lot of criticism and negativity. Sometimes we may not even believe that we have our own special gifts that are worth sharing - that we are worth something.

What I find exciting about the Bible readings for this Sunday is that we hear beautiful words of encouragement and confirmation from God. In the book of Isaiah, God speaks lovingly and tenderly to the people of Israel: *'Fear not! I have redeemed you - I have called you by name - you are mine'*. And in today's Gospel we also hear such words when the heavens open after Jesus is baptized: *'You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased'*. It seems that even Jesus needs such words of encouragement when he is baptized and now embarks on the long journey that ultimately leads him to the cross. Baptism has always been an important part of the Christian faith and Christian identity. Baptism means a new beginning, a new life in and with

God. In the past, when adult baptism was still the norm, this was often symbolized by giving the baptized a new name.

But baptism is also encouragement and confirmation. In baptism, you and I and all those who are baptized receive the promise that we belong to God and that nothing, absolutely nothing, can change this. In baptism, God appoints us as his beloved and unspeakably cherished children.

*Fear not, for I have redeemed you - I have called you by name - you are mine.*

This promise, this encouragement, this confirmation changes our lives. And hopefully this also leads to a change in the way we live our lives - that our hearts overflow with the love and grace of God towards our neighbors.

Of course, we all know that this is not always so easy. The world is not always full of love and grace - quite the opposite! Perhaps this is partly because people don't feel accepted and validated, that they don't think they are doing enough or are enough. And how can you build someone else up if you feel bad about yourself?

I don't know about you, but I have some days when I'm down - discouraged, tired, shattered. Days when criticism really gets to me, days when I just can't forgive myself for a stupid mistake. There are days when I feel I'm not enough, not worthy. There are days when I forget the promise God made on the day I was baptized. Do you sometimes feel like that?

I think it is important that we remember our baptism and everything that goes with it: God's promise, God's assurance, God's confirmation. We simply need to hear words of encouragement from time to time. After all, we live in a world

where people are not necessarily kind and friendly to each other. We need to be reminded that we are surrounded by God's grace and love. That we are infinitely valuable in the eyes of God, no matter what others think of us or think of us.

I think it is also important that we remember that all the baptized are God's beloved and precious children. Homeless people, strangers, refugees. Those with whom we do not get along. Those who look different, think differently, live differently. I have a connection to our short movie. People raised up by waiting in long LINE for the Validation. They all belong to God, redeemed and called and created in God's image. WE are all siblings, and we are entrusted to each other.

Let us remember that we are confirmed by God, that we are valuable in the eyes of God, always - as siblings in the Lord - and that this confirmation has the power to change us - and the world.