

January 12, 2020
Jesus at the Jordan: God's Beloved
Matthew 3:13-17

If I had only one sermon to preach, what would I preach about? If there were one key truth I would want people to know, what would it be?

My theme would be this: God loves you. You are His beloved child. Through the cross of Jesus, your relationship with Him is restored, and He calls you His daughter/son and His friend. You belong in His love. You belong In His family. You belong in His church.

Who am I?

This truth – you are beloved and you belong – goes to the heart of who we are. Who am I, really? Sometimes we answer that question with, ***"I am what I do."*** When things are going well and I have a little success, I feel good about myself. But when I fail, I get depressed. As I get older and my abilities change, I'm not sure I have any value anymore.

Or we might say, ***"I am what other people say about me."*** When people speak well of me, I hold my heads up and feel good. But when somebody starts saying negative things about me or rejects me, I get defensive, insecure, and question my worth.

We might also say, ***"I am what I have."*** It may be "stuff." It may be our health. It may be our family. But as soon as we lose any of it our identity is gone, and we despair.

So much of our identity is shaped as we think, *"I am what I do," "I am what others say about me,"* or *"I am what I have."* When that's the case, life follows a roller coaster of emotion. When I am successful, people speak well of me, and I have a lot, I am "up." But when I start losing, people are critical, or my abilities change, I slip into despair.

Henri Nouwen comments, *"As a Christian, I am firmly convinced that the decisive moment of Jesus' public life was his baptism, when he heard the divine affirmation, 'You are my Beloved on whom my favour rests.' In this core experience, Jesus is reminded in a deep, deep way of who he really is ... You are not what you do, or what others say about you, or what you possess: 'You are God's Beloved!' I hope you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold ...*

"It certainly is not easy to hear that voice in a world filled with voices that shout: 'You are no good; you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable; you are nobody unless you can demonstrate the opposite.' These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them. That's the trap of self-rejection ...

"The greatest trap in life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection, doubting who we truly are. Success, popularity, and power can indeed present great temptations, but their seductive quality comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation

of self-rejection. When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily seen as attractive solutions.”¹

Let's step outside ourselves for a moment. Imagine you were looking at yourself ... imagine (if you can) that you are God, looking at you, yourself. What does God think of you? Who does God say that you are? Do you belong?

In Jeremiah 1:5, God says, *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart ..."* In Psalm 139 the psalmist speaks of how God made each of us uniquely and wonderfully, how he knows each of us better than we know ourselves. Jesus speaks to and calls those some considered the "least" as well as wealthy, "successful" people – with respect, dignity, compassion, and love. We are all beloved. We all belong.

God loves us as we are, where we are: ***we are His Beloved.*** True, He does not intend to leave us unchanged, but He does love us for who He created us to be. We need to let go of what others say about us and recognize God loves us. He doesn't say, *"When you change this, then I will love you."* His is an unconditional love that starts where we are.

The Spirit of God says to each one of us, *"You are the Beloved of God. You are my Beloved son or daughter, on you my favour rests."* Can we believe that? If we listen, we can hear that through the voices of your friends and family. We can hear it in the people who care about us and pray for us. We can hear it in the people who encourage us to keep going when we feel like quitting. We can hear it as we pray and listen for God's voice. We can hear it throughout all of Scripture, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

1. We are God's CHOSEN people

In Psalm 139, there is a profound sense of "chosen-ness." From the very beginning, David knows God loves him. When we use the word "chosen" or even "beloved" we conclude is one person is chosen, someone else is "not chosen" or "not beloved" (remember those days when you were not picked for the soccer team at recess ...). However, to be chosen by God is inclusive, not exclusive. It doesn't create a hierarchy where some people are "in" and others are "out." God's love, God's chosen-ness celebrates ***all*** people are equally created in the image of God, equally chosen by God, and equally loved by God. God's "choosing" is compassionate and inclusive, not competitive and exclusive.

As the people of God, we live in an alternative reality. Society divides people, rejects people (and us), puts other people (and us) down, excludes other people (and us), builds walls, and creates winners and losers. In the Kingdom of God, we are loved and we love, we are forgiven and we forgive, we are not condemned and we do not condemn, we are welcomed by God and we welcome others, we experienced God's mercy and grace and we reach out in mercy and grace. We can be thankful people, thankful that we are people whom God loves, for whom Jesus died, and in whom the Spirit lives. We belong.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*, pp.28-32. This is more fully developed in Nouwen's *Life of the Beloved*.

As we know who we are, we can love others without fear and with a healthy, Spirit-led love. From a place of inner, God-given strength, we can treat everyone else as God's beloved as well. We lose nothing by being loving and gracious to others. God's love builds bridges, bridges of compassion, forgiveness, and grace. The Kingdom of God is about love and mercy, forgiveness and grace. Everyone belongs.

2. We are God's BLESSED people

God, the Father, blessed Jesus, when He said, *"This is my Beloved Son, in Him I am well pleased ..."* When was the last time you felt a blessing – an affirmation – like that? When was the last time you prayed a blessing for someone else? What does that even mean?

In Psalm 139, there is a deep sense of knowing and being known by God – we cannot escape from Him (in the best of senses). We are blessed by knowing and being known by God. God blesses us with His presence. He is always there for us. We belong.

Nouwen writes, *"I am increasingly aware of how much we fearful, anxious, insecure human beings are in need of a blessing ... We all need each other's blessings ..."* Blessing others means praying for, and praying over one another in a personal, thoughtful, intentional way. We do not let them "escape" our love, just as we cannot escape God's love. In prayer and compassion, we are always there. Sometimes this is something we do in person. Sometimes it is something we do as we pray for those who are far away.

What do people need most? When we pray a blessing, it's not about asking for health, wealth, and happiness. These are not what people need most. What we do need most is to know God loves us, saves us, forgives us, cares for us, desires to know us in our innermost being, and calls us to know Him and live for Him. We need most to know we are God's beloved people. The blessing we pray for other people is that they know Jesus.

The Lord tells Moses to tell Aaron and his sons, *"This is how you are to bless my people. Say to them: 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord show you His favour and give you His peace'"* (Numbers 6:22-26). Pray that you may know God's peace and love yourself. And from that deep foundation of love we can pray for those around us ...

3. We are God's BROKEN people

We are all broken. David (who wrote Psalm 139) knows all about brokenness: he speaks of the brokenness of others (139:19-22). He asks God to search his innermost being to find those places of hurt and brokenness deep within himself (139:23-24).

Our first spontaneous response to our brokenness, pain, suffering and sin is to avoid it, ignore it, or deny it. David challenges us to confront it. Facing our brokenness, living it through, praying it through, working it through in community leads to healing. James writes, *"Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the*

testing of your faith develops perseverance ..." (James 1:2-3). James – like many biblical writers, sees problems, rejection, suffering, and pain as the norm, not the exception. He encourages us to accept our difficulties, not as attacks on our self-worth, but as ways to know, more intimately and powerfully, the presence and power of God in our lives. Paradoxically, failure, rejection, and hardship help us know we are God's beloved more personally and profoundly. *"Don't throw up your hands and run away,"* he says, *"Work with your difficulties. Perseverance must finish its work so you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything"* (James 1:4).

Paradoxically, when we allow God to work in and through our brokenness, God can take the broken shards of our life and transform them into diamonds that shine hope and healing into the lives of others ...

4. We are God's GIVEN people

We are chosen. We are blessed. We are broken. And we are given. We know from experience the joy that comes from being able to help others know they belong. It truly is more blessed to give than to receive. This is one of the most counterintuitive mysteries: our greatest fulfilment comes from giving ourselves to other people.

In our highly competitive and greedy world, we have lost touch with the joy of giving. We often live as if our fulfilment depended on getting. But I don't know anyone who is really happy because of what they have. The most joyful and content people I know are those who are the best givers: of love, time, wisdom, forgiveness, care, or mercy.

"The real question is not 'What we offer each other?' but 'Who can we be for one another?' ... As I grow older, I discover more and more the greatest gift I have to offer is my own joy of living, inner peace, silence and solitude, sense of well-being. When I ask myself, 'Who helps me most?' I must answer, 'The one who is willing to share their life with me'" (Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, p. 90). This is how we can help others the most, too.

The Spirit of God says to each of us, *"You are the Beloved of God. You are my Beloved son or daughter, on you my favour rests."* You belong. He wants to walk, talk, guide, and love you. Will you let Him?

More profoundly, God invites you into belonging with other people. Are you willing to allow someone else to share their life with you? Are you willing to share life with someone else? It's risky. But it is in those honest relationships we find hope, healing, and love. It's in belonging to God, and in belonging with other people, that we find life. A candle, which lights another candle, loses nothing of itself in the process. We can bring love and light into others' lives and lose nothing through the process.