

Baptized and Beloved

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Matthew 3:13-17 — Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

One of my favorite authors is a man named Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest who lived and wrote in the late 20th century. I discovered his writing when I was in college, and ever since then I have considered him to be one of my spiritual godparents. He was a professor of spirituality and pastoral care at Yale and Harvard divinity schools, and for the last few years of his life, he was living in a community called L'Arche, where people with intellectual disabilities and people without intellectual disabilities live and work together in a community of faith and fellowship. Henri Nouwen wrote dozens of books, and if you're ever interested in reading one of them, come by my office sometime and borrow one.

I mention Henri this morning because I love his interpretation of Jesus' baptism. In his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri writes, "Jesus has made it clear to me that the same voice that he heard at the River Jordan — 'This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased' — this same voice can also be heard by me." Historically, most biblical interpreters have treated those words, proclaimed from the heavens, as uniquely applicable to Jesus: God is setting Jesus apart in this moment of baptism, and Jesus is uniquely God's son, uniquely beloved, uniquely pleasing to God. Nouwen, however, universalizes these words. God is saying, to *all* of God's children, "You are my child, you are the beloved, and I am pleased with you." And what sets Jesus apart, Nouwen suggests, is that Jesus perfectly understood what God was saying to him. Given his divine connection to God, Jesus *knew* himself to be God's beloved: he internalized this truth and was guided by it to a greater extent than anyone in history.

According to Nouwen, the essence of the spiritual life is the gradual internalization of this truth. This is what it means to grow as a Christian, he says: to be guided, more and more, by the knowledge that we are God's children, God's beloved. It may sound simple, but this is not easy, friends. It's one thing to affirm, on the level of our minds, that a God exists and that this God loves the world at large; it's another thing to trust, on the level of our hearts, that God loves you and me individually. Most Presbyterians, I speculate (speaking as a little bit of an outsider), are pretty good at affirming God's love in general, in universal terms — "Oh, sure, God loves everyone," we will say with confidence. But do we experience this love as an intimate, personal

love for our own selves? Do you believe that the God of the universe takes pleasure in *you*, delights in *you*, calls *you* “beloved”?

So many things in our lives make it hard for us to believe this. So many things try to drown out the voice from heaven that says to us, “This is my beloved child.” One of the worst of these things, I think, is the lie that we must *earn* God’s love (and anyone else’s love) — the lie that we are worthy of love *only* when we accomplish certain things or reach a certain point. As kids and as teenagers, we feel like, in order to be worthy of love, we need to get good grades and to excel in sports or some other activity — so when we fail a test or don’t make the team, we’re more than just upset; deep down, we fear that we are now less worthy of love. Similarly, for us adults, we feel like we need to lead a successful career or have a perfect family in order to be worthy of love, and so when we don’t get the promotion or our family falls apart, again, we’re more than just upset; deep down, our own sense of belovedness is called into question.

Friends, my prayer for us in this new year is that we will continue to grow in our understanding — not just in our minds, but also in our hearts — our understanding of God’s intimate, personal love for us. The spirit of God has already descended on us, friends, and the voice from heaven is calling to us, again and again, “My child. My beloved.” My prayer is that each of us will grow more and more attentive to this voice and that we would find new ways to cultivate that attentiveness in our daily lives. Perhaps, for example, you could memorize a verse or two from scripture that reminds you of God’s love for you and recite it to yourself in those moments when you are feeling less worthy of love. Or perhaps another idea will come to your mind. Regardless of the “how,” let us all strive to hear, loud and clear, the voice from heaven that says to each of us, “You are my child, my beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

Of course, the voice that calls us “beloved” is also calling us to help others hear that voice as well. God not only wants us to know that we ourselves are loved, but also wants us to share, in word and in deed, God’s love with the world around us, and especially with those people who are routinely told that they are less worthy of love — because there are people for whom the lies are more routine. There are forces — social, cultural, historical, and even religious forces — that target certain people and tell them that they are less worthy of love than others. What exactly are these forces, and who are these people that they’re targeting? Well, it’s a question for all of us to ask, and there are many different answers.

Our first passage this morning, with its talk of bringing out prisoners, has me thinking about inmates on death row and inmates with lifelong sentences. The message being sent to these people, the lie aimed at them, is that they are beyond redemption. In recent days, I’ve been thinking a lot about women who have had an abortion and who have been told that their choice is an unforgivable sin. And of course, I am always thinking a lot about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other queer people who are told that their desires lead to their damnation. These are just some of the people who I think are routinely, disproportionately told that they are less worthy of God’s love.

In the Hebrew bible, the Old Testament, there are three kinds of people who are consistently mentioned in this regard: widows, orphans, and foreigners. Over and over again, God instructs the Israelites to give special attention to these people, because the world renders them vulnerable. The world treats them as if they are less worthy of love. And so our task, friends, is to ask ourselves, “Who are some of today’s widows, orphans, and foreigners?” Whoever you discern them to be, may we strive to be especially attentive to them, to counter the forces that target them, and to find ways to remind them that God calls them “beloved” — just as God calls you “beloved.”

We partake of communion today as God’s beloved children, as those for whom the beloved Jesus gave himself. Be nourished, friends. Amen.