

“You are the Beloved”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Church – Toano, VA
1st Sunday after Epiphany/Baptism of Our Lord – January 11, 2008
Mark 1:4-11

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” These are the words Jesus heard at his baptism. “You are my Son, the Beloved.” In Mark’s Gospel this is the first time we see Jesus. We hear that he came from Nazareth, that John baptized him, that when he was emerging from the water he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit descending, and then these words: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Jesus hasn’t even done anything yet. At least as far as we know. He hasn’t healed anyone. He hasn’t cast out any demons. He hasn’t preached any sermons, told any parables, done any teaching. We haven’t even heard stories of a miraculous birth. The voice from heaven calls him Beloved just for being who he is. Let me repeat. The voice from heaven calls him Beloved, not for what he has done, but for being who he is.

This is the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. It begins with baptism and this acknowledgement of his belovedness. In the very next line, a line we won’t hear until Lent, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness where he faces temptations. But he faces them knowing that he is beloved, that God is well pleased with him. Throughout his ministry he is able to respond to those he meets out of this sense of belovedness.

Why can't we do the same?

When we are baptized we may not see the heavens split apart and hear a voice telling us we are loved, but we also aren't Jesus. We are, however, all children of God, and when we are baptized we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. We are beloved of God even before our baptisms, even before we are born. God loves us when we are in our mothers' wombs. We heard in the passage from Genesis that God created the light and saw that it was good. God created everything and saw that it was all good, including humankind, including us. God sees that we are good.

Why do we have such a hard time believing this?

Why is it easier to listen to the negative voices of our culture that tell us all the ways in which we don't add up? Do you hear them as loudly as I do? You don't make enough money or eat the right foods or stay on the right diet or join the right organizations. You aren't pretty enough, thin enough, muscular enough, young enough, rich enough, educated enough, old enough, healthy enough, successful enough. We all have the specific ones that speak to us telling us we're ugly or unpopular or unwanted or unlovable. Sometimes those negative voices seem to be shouting; they're so loud. They all have the same message. You are not enough. You are not the Beloved.

They are wrong.

Henri Nouwen, who was a great Roman Catholic spiritual writer, wrote a wonderful book called *Life of the Beloved*. In it he tries to explain the spiritual life to a secular friend of his in simple terms. He talks about the power that the negative voices have over us. He writes, “Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the ‘Beloved.’ Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence.”¹ Somehow we come to believe the rejecting voices more than we believe God’s voice. Those negative thoughts are deceptive and pervasive, and it’s easy to give into the temptation of thinking they’re what’s real.

But we are the children of God. We are beloved of God. We are well pleasing to God. We have to believe that at our core and cast out the demonic voices that tell us otherwise. When we believe in our belovedness, when we know in our souls that God sees us and knows that we are good, then we will be able to carry God’s good news into the world. Once we know ourselves to be loved, then we can share that love with others. Then our ministry becomes a response to God’s love rather than an attempt to earn God’s love.

The temptation to listen to the negative voices is a strong one. Henri Nouwen offers us three guidelines for resisting it. First he says that we must learn to recognize that the world tells us lies about ourselves. It’s our job to expose those lies and remind ourselves of the truth of our belovedness. He suggests we say to ourselves, “These feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God’s eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity, and held

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 33.

safe in an everlasting embrace.”² We have to be vigilant in identifying what is not true and replacing it with the core truth of our belovedness.

Nouwen’s second guideline is that we need to surround ourselves with people who tell us the truth about ourselves, with people who remind us that God has chosen us. We aren’t alone, and we don’t have to rely on listening only to our own voices. We can find people who will guide us back to the truth of who we are.

Finally Nouwen suggests that we celebrate our belovedness constantly. One of the primary ways we can do this is by expressing our gratitude to God for loving us. What would it be like to start our day by saying, “I am beloved of God. God is well pleased with me. Thank you, God.” Instead of waking up and thinking about all the ways we won’t live up to our own expectations that day. What would it be like to be so convinced of God’s love for us that we are compelled to go out and show others how they are also loved by God? What would it be like to let go of self-rejection, of bitterness, of disappointment, of cynicism and instead choose gratitude?

[In a few minutes] we will be baptizing Lexie Bisch. It’s easy when we look at a baby to see someone who is loved by God. Babies haven’t heard the negative messages sent by the world. Babies haven’t yet learned self-rejection. We’d like to wish for Lexie that she would never hear the negative voices, but we know she will. She needs us to remind her that she is beloved of God, just as she is. In the same way we all need each other to provide that same reminder. We are a community of those who are beloved of God. We can help each other remember.

² Ibid., 59.

When you face the temptations and wildernesses of life remember your baptism.
Remember that you are a beloved child of God.