

“Beloved”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25 (A) – 23 October 2011  
Matthew 22:34-46

You are a beloved child of God. Don’t deny it. Don’t ignore it. Don’t forget it.

Temptation beckons us to disregard that most precious fact of life. Yet nothing is more crucial than to accept that you are a beloved child of God.

I know for some people this may be hard to believe. Perhaps you grew up in a family situation where you weren’t allowed to be child, or maybe your parents didn’t express their love for you very well, which makes it hard to imagine what it means to be a beloved child of God. Some of us here suffer from deeply embedded feelings of inadequacy and guilt. “How could God love me, when I am so worthless?” You might be wondering.

These past, or in some cases present, experiences can seem impossible to overcome. However, that’s why we are offered the gift of faith. If you place your trust in Jesus, you can come to a dawning awareness of God’s amazing love: unconditional, everlasting, supremely forgiving. Being part of a community of faith helps nurture that relationship with God, where you can gradually discover that God adores you for who you are. God may not like everything you do, but what you do isn’t who you are. God loves you, despite whatever reasons you might conjure to make you think otherwise.

I know how tough it is. I have struggled with the idea that I am a beloved child of God. I was blessed to grow up in a very loving home, but felt unaccepted by my peers. Since affection from my classmates seemed out of reach, I decided at the age of twelve to earn their respect by being the best at everything. I turned myself into a fierce competitor. I tried to deserve what nobody seemed willing to give, approval. And it worked, probably too well.

As I entered the priesthood, this competitive impulse needed to be tamed. The sharp elbows of competition felt ill at ease with serving as a priest. So I started to focus instead on being the best servant of God I could be. For some irrational reason, I found it difficult to square the idea of being God's servant with being God's child. I could see how sensible this was for other people, the two in tandem, both servant and child. Yet half of this escaped me.

It wasn't until my back grounded me this spring that I began to re-examine this, and that reappraisal came thanks to my good friend and seminary classmate, Lauren Stanley. Many of you know her. She's preached here several times in her capacity as a missionary to South Sudan and Haiti. Lauren Stanley came to visit me, one of those days when I was laid out flat on my back. We talked about many things, and as usual, our conversation drifted into spiritual matters. Then, as only she could, with her irrepressible energy and characteristic bluntness, she told me, "Michael, I've known since seminary that you have one big problem. You see yourself as a servant of God, but not as a child of God."

I've thought about that statement every day since, and it's the inspiration for this sermon. When I read for the thousandth time the Great Commandment contained in today's reading from Matthew, I saw it differently. In the past, the command to love God totally would have popped out at me, or my attention would have rested on the command to love neighbor. But this time, what stood out from the page, like letters six-inches high, was the phrase "as yourself."

The implication is clear. To love your neighbor, you must first love yourself, and to love your neighbor in the way God desires, you must love yourself properly: not in the self-indulgent way so commonly portrayed in the media, but in a holy, life-giving way. Step one in loving yourself properly is to accept that you are a beloved child of God.

I won't pretend to have settled down with that reality in the way God wants, but grace has brought me far on the journey. And what I have experienced is a different quality of life. Things that once created great anxiety for me are no longer such a big deal. There's a deeper sense of peace that provides stability, balance, a centeredness that wasn't there before. I enjoy life more, and take fewer things for granted.

Of course, what really got my attention is the newfound understanding that I cannot obey the Great Commandment without receiving God's love as the beloved child I am. That really hits home for a guy who's focused on being the best servant of God possible. What neighbor wants to be loved as I love myself if that self-love isn't anchored in the freely-given and humbly-accepted love of God? And how can someone even begin to love God fully without accepting God's marvelous love, which is the only thing that can fulfill us, the only thing that can make us capable of loving God back?

Accepting your identity as a beloved child of God is crucial. Without that identity who shall you be? When our identity isn't rooted in the truth that we are beloved children of God, all of us, me included, are tempted to pin our identity on meeting the expectations of others. That's a terrible way to live, because other people expect so much, and there are so many people to satisfy. Living that way is like changing the façade of your house countless times each day, while inside it's empty and rotten. Consider how much energy that takes.

Yet when we accept that rightful role as God's beloved child, we can be free to be the people God designed us to be, and the love we receive can be shared with others, because our interior will be fully furnished, and the façade can simply reflect that interior reality. Some people won't like it. Some people don't want others to be beloved children of God, because a

person can't accept God's love is easy to manipulate and control. But those people are who they are, and we need to be who we are, beloved children of God.

When we accept that glorious love with childlike awe and wonder, we can imagine things that had once appeared unimaginable. We worry less. Our thoughts clear and we make better decisions. The violent, uncertain, confusing world we occupy seems less threatening. When you know that you are a beloved child of the King of the Universe, there's a lot less to be scared of. Who doesn't want to live like that?

Naturally, there's the question of how. How can you accept that you are a beloved child of God, or if you've already claimed that identity, how can you guard against giving it away? Well, the answers may seem trite, but they are true. Pray until you need knee surgery. Or better yet, choose a different prayer posture, and save your knees. But whatever you do, pray. Some people feel like they don't know how to pray. If you know how to breathe, you know how to pray. There's no right way to do it. The only wrong to pray is to not do it.

Scripture is a convincing companion, when it comes to accepting God's love. How can you read about Jesus, and all he went through for us, and be unaware of God's determined love? Look at the witness of the Apostle Paul, and how his encounter with the Risen Christ changed his life for the better. And as I said before, being connected with a caring community of faith makes a huge difference. What better place to love your neighbor and be loved by them?

I think the main reason why we avoid prayer, the Bible, and Church is not because people are lazy or apathetic or too busy or forgetful. It's because people think they are unworthy. And those thoughts of unworthiness stem from guilt and shame, a sense of inadequacy and irrelevance. But if we open our hearts even to the mere possibility that God loves us, those thoughts get swept away like dry autumn leaves from a sidewalk. Yes, those thoughts will come

back, just like the leaves, but God will keep coming back with his broom of love, if you will only keep imagining with a hopeful heart that, yes, you are a beloved child of God.

It's crucial, absolutely crucial. If you spend your entire day doing nothing else than thinking, "I am a beloved child of God," then you will have the most fruitful, worthwhile day of your whole year. Without that felt awareness of who you are, there's little hope of keeping the Great Commandment. Without that deeply embedded sense that you are God's beloved child, day to day life is going to be harder than it needs to be. Part of yourself will be missing, and your neighbor – not to mention the world – needs that part of you to be alive and active more than you possibly know.

Finally, there's no greater hurt I can think of than the idea that my children might think that they are unworthy of my love, and I wonder if that's how God feels when we feel unable to accept His sacrificial, unconditional, astonishing love. I'm not trying to push your guilt buttons, but if we look at it from God's side and see that almost desperate yearning to love us and for us to accept that love, then we can gain greater perspective on the central truth of life: You are a beloved child of God. Don't deny it. Don't ignore it. Don't forget it. Accept it, and enjoy. Amen.