

BELOVED

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Lent 1

In today's world we don't often use the word beloved. Like the word behold that I preached about during Advent, beloved is a word that unfortunately has pretty well disappeared. Not only have we stopped using the word, all too many of us do not feel or act like God's beloved. I have had people say to me, well I'll come back to church once I have things straightened out. I'm not a very good person right now and I don't feel loved by God. Or the other variation I'm not sure God loves me because I don't have a handle on this religion thing.

Some of this is caught up in the image of God that has been taught by many churches for many years. Healing prayers disappeared from churches because people were taught that illness was a just punishment from God and what business did we have in interfering with God's just punishment. I have a prayer book from the 1840s that has a prayer that thanks God for visiting this affliction on me for the purification of my soul. Now this is difficult to square with a God who considers us his beloved children. Natural disaster, defeats in war, and economic hardship all get transferred by some into just punishments by God. Well those do not sound like acts of God to me, but acts of nature and of evil. Yet we tend to carry this baggage somewhere in the back of our minds. I hope and pray that over the next few minutes that you can be convinced to dump that baggage.

This problem was obviously on the mind of our Presiding Bishop during her visit to Southern Virginia for the consecration of our new bishop. The clergy of the diocese had the opportunity to gather and spend two hours with her on Friday morning. She is an amazing leader. I cannot imagine standing up in front of a group of 100+ clergy and saying, "So what do you want to talk about?" I think she is able to take that kind of risk because in the midst of it all, she knows that she is a beloved child of God.

She took some time to share that with us at the very beginning. "What is it like to feel beloved?" she asked the group of us. When was the last time you felt or were told you were beloved. There was a total silence punctuated by a little nervous laughter. She asked to close our eyes and just repeat, "You are my beloved." This was a fascinating meditation. I just wish we had the 20 minutes to try this today. However, I encourage you to make the time sometime in the next few days to sit, close your eyes and just repeat "You are my beloved." See what happens, even better give me a call and tell me what that felt like.

The challenge then is to come up out of that experience and return to the world. For part of the problem I suspect is the little devil that tends to sit on our shoulders most of the time and whisper "No your not." You will notice that as soon as this is said Jesus is tempted. How many times after we hear this type of affirmation or any affirmation do we disagree or say

no that's not right. Stop right there. That is the devil talking. A major problem of mine with a lot of theology about us miserable sinners, there is no health in us etc. is that we get stuck there. Are we miserable sinners? When you look at the facts most of the world is pretty sinful. In fact I agree with C. S. Lewis that the devil's greatest victory is that nobody believes in him anymore. However we tend to get stuck there.

Could this voice that tells us we are not the beloved, not good enough to be loved by God be the devil tempting us? Trying to separate us from God? I believe it is. This is the devil trying to keep that distance between God and ourselves. That distance is what we know as sin and where sin lurks and works. That distance is where the devil however you want to conceive of him does his best work.

We do have an answer to that voice and the assurance that we are beloved children of God. Our baptism is a sign of our adoption as God's beloved. We are marked in baptism by the spirit as Christ's own forever.

This concept of being beloved is not restricted to the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus. In our reading from Hebrew Scripture we hear of one of the first covenants between God and his people. This is the covenant with Noah.

Over the next three weeks we are going to explore the idea of covenant as portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures. Noah is first, then Abraham and finally Moses. All of these are new definitions of the relationship between God and humanity. These all represent very radical theology for their time and also represent timeless theology.

A brief word about Noah and the covenant with God. You cannot tell me that God didn't know that the descendants of Noah were going to have their problems. Yet look at the covenant, the promise God makes. This covenant is all grace offered by God to Noah with nothing expected in return. God makes all of the promises in this covenant; there is no requirement of reciprocity. This is why it is a covenant rather than a contract. This is what it means to be one of God's beloved. So for those who feel they have to get right with God before they become the beloved, here is exhibit A to debunk that argument.

We now begin our walk into Lent. What do you seek during this time of reflection? If this concept of being beloved appeals to you, then this might be the Lenten discipline for you. The key idea behind all of this is what I said in my sermon on Ash Wednesday. God's greatest desire is that we desire God. Desiring to live as beloved of God is a worthy subject for reflection this Lent.

Henri Nouwen is an amazing writer who has written extensively on this subject. As a final thought I would like to read a quote from his book on the Prodigal Son.

"Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not "How am I to find God?" but "How am I to let myself be found by him?" The question is not "How am I to know God?" but "How am I to let myself be known by God?" And, finally, the

question is not “How am I to love God?” but “How am I to let myself be loved by God?”

From *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* by Henri J. M. Nouwen (New York: Image Books, 1992).