

March 12, 2017
Matthew 3:1-2,5-6,13-17
Matthew 17:1-9
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Creekside COB

“Beloved, Accepted, and Chosen”

Jean (Xahn)Vanier (VanYEA), founder of the L’Arche community for developmentally disabled adults, tells this story about Peter, a community resident who has Down Syndrome. Peter was asked by a visitor if he liked to pray. Peter said he did. “What do you ask for when you pray?” probed the visitor. Peter replied, “I listen.” The person persisted. “What does God say to you?” Puzzled, Peter looked up at the man and said: “He just says, ‘You are my beloved son.’”

That’s the glowing message Jesus personally received from God, not once but twice. At Jesus’ baptism the Spirit descended like a dove and a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.”

In the transfiguration scene, Peter, James and John accompanied Jesus to a high mountain. The Spirit descended on Jesus and his face and clothes shone a dazzling white. Again the voice came, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” During that stunning scene, Elijah and Moses joined Jesus while the disciples looked on.

I have always been struck by the word Beloved. I shared with you in earlier sermons that as a teen and young adult, I felt very unsure about whether God loved me. The words I heard clearly were, “Be perfect.” The words “You are my beloved” were mostly inaudible. Someone referred me to a book by Paul Tillich -- I don’t remember the title. When I was feeling particularly low I would go to a page in that book that said, “You are accepted,” and hoped somehow the words would get through to me. Today I can thankfully hear and accept that

message, “You are my beloved daughter, my favor rests on you.” The words *accepted*, *chosen* and *beloved* all have the same special feel to me. This understanding that God has called us beloved sons and daughters is what I want to talk about. The baptism of Jesus and the transfiguration are just the background of this truth.

These words of encouragement from the Spirit at Jesus’ baptism were well placed in Jesus’ life. Immediately afterward, Matthew says, “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.”³ The tempter came in that moment of physical hunger and weakness, but because Jesus knew who he was, he had the strength to resist temptation. Jesus knew he was chosen by God for a bigger ministry than the one Satan offered him.

It’s always interesting to look through the Bible and see the variety of uses for a particular word. Most references to the word “beloved” come from Song of Solomon and the letters of Paul. Song of Solomon speaks of a lover as “beloved.” Paul refers to his traveling companions and friends as “beloved.” The baptism and transfiguration stories refer to Jesus as God’s beloved. Patricia Sanchez says that by virtue of our baptisms, we are also God’s beloved children. “Endowed with grace and dignity, we become holy places where the Spirit of God comes to dwell and to remain.”¹

Romans 9 gives an interesting twist to God’s intent: “I’ll call nobodies and make them somebodies; I’ll call the unloved and make them beloved. In the place where they yelled out, “You’re nobody!” they are now calling you God’s living children.” Paul notes, “If each grain of sand on the seashore were numbered and the sum labeled *chosen of God*, they’d be numbers still, not names; *salvation comes by personal selection. God doesn’t count us; he calls us by name.*”

I read several books in preparation for this sermon. The most helpful was Henri Nouwen’s book, *Life of the Beloved*. In a series of sermons on YouTube, Nouwen enlarges on the universal question, “Who am I?” There are so many ways to answer that question.

¹ Patricia Datchuck Sanchez, “You are my beloved,” *Spiritual Reflections*, Jan. 10, 2015.

- I am what I do: “I’m a mechanic” or “I’m a nurse.”
- I am what others say about me. That’s a dangerous one!
- I am what I have -- a good education, a good family, great health.

But these answers go awry when we lose a job, or someone criticizes us, or our health turns sour.

When Jesus was tempted, Satan said, “Do something and you will be great. Turn the stone into bread. Throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple and the angels will protect you. Worship me and I’ll give you all the kingdoms of the world.” But Jesus knew they were lies. Our greatness is not in what we do or who we become or what people say about us. The answer to “Who am I” is “You are my beloved sons and daughters on whom my favor rests.”

Here’s what the Bible says about us. God loved us before we were born. God knit us together in our mother’s womb. God calls us by name. God has a plan for us. God claims us: “You are mine.” God carved our names on the palm of his hand. The bottom line is, nothing can separate us from the love of God! Nouwen wrote a whole book on the story of the Prodigal Son, the most compelling example of God’s love and forgiveness that I know.

The greatest trap in our life, Nouwen suggests, is not success, popularity or power, but self-rejection. “We live in a world constantly trying to convince us that the burden is on us to prove that we are worthy of being loved.” These negative voices are sometimes so loud and persistent it is easy to believe them. The secret fear we have is, “If you knew who I really am, you wouldn’t love me.” Tell me, folks, that I’m not the only one in this room who has experienced that! I have found that when we comprehend that we are God’s beloved, we are set free from fear.

God has chosen us. To be chosen as a beloved child of God is not like being chosen for a baseball team or being the teacher’s favorite. “Instead of excluding others, it includes others. Instead of rejecting others as less valuable, it accepts others in their own uniqueness. It

is not a competitive, but a compassionate choice.”² The greatest joy of being chosen is the discovery that others are chosen as well.

How do we get in touch with the fact that God chooses us? Nouwen suggests three ways. First, keep unmasking the world for what it is: manipulative, controlling, destructive. Second, look for people and places that remind you of your identity as God’s chosen. Third, celebrate with gratitude that God has chosen you; acknowledge that you are not an “accident,” but a divine choice.³ It is only when I know that I am uniquely loved by God that I have the eyes to see that you, too, are unique in God’s eyes.

This week’s Christian practice is a liturgical exercise called the “Beloved” Prayer, written by Arthur LeClair, director of the Spiritual Life Center in Denver. Look at the description in your bulletin a minute. Paragraph 2 suggests writing a note to yourself with the words, “You are my Beloved. My favor rests on you.” Put it on your nightstand and read it every morning when you get up.

He also suggests taking some silent moments to think about these three statements, one at a time.

Jesus, you are the Beloved
Jesus, I am the Beloved
Jesus, we (all) are the Beloved

Our comprehension happens in this order. First, I acknowledge God’s declaration about Jesus that he is God’s son on whom God’s favor rests.” When I absorb who God is, I realize that Jesus tells me I am also God’s beloved. When I can comprehend that I am chosen and loved, I realize that promise is not for me alone, but for all of us. That truth doesn’t sink in overnight. Every time life challenges us that we aren’t good enough, we need to be reminded that we are the chosen of God. Hearing and acknowledging this three-part truth will change us.

² Nouwen, p. 55

³ Nouwen, p. 58-59

Karl Barth, an outstanding theologian of modern times, was asked to summarize the central overriding message contained in his 13-volume set of *Church Dogmatics*. He thought a moment and then said, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” I’m convinced, too, that this is the most important message of the Bible. Jesus is the beloved of God. I am the beloved of God. We are all the beloved of God. May God’s voice of love be louder than the negative voices that drag us down. Amen? Amen.

YouTube sermons by Henri Nouwen on his book, “Life of the Beloved,” preached at Crystal Cathedral:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8U4V4aaNWk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=naCvCZ2Bv00>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-dBT0by40w>