

Child of God

Mark 1:4-11

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Like everyone who was baptized as a child, I have almost no memory of my own baptism. But I have wonderful memories of the baptisms of my children. Anna was baptized at 4 months and Jonathan at 9 months. Some of you were here for those baptisms. Others of you will remember that when Pastor Kelly baptized, he was not stingy with the water. Neither Anna nor Jonathan had a lot of hair, but what they did have was dripping wet by the time he was done baptizing them. And at some point during the baptism ceremony, Pastor Kelly would scoop up handfuls of water and throw the water out on the congregation, so we could remember our baptisms too. Once I'd been to a few of Pastor Kelly's baptisms, I tried to avoid sitting near the front of the church on baptism days. It was a little bit like having front row seats at Sea World.

As a parent, when I physically handed both Jonathan and Anna over to the pastor to baptize, it felt like a symbol of handing my children over to God. Even though Tom and I have the responsibility of loving and caring for them, I know my children belong most of all to God. From the first moment of their lives to the last, I believe God is with my children always, in ways and situations that are far beyond my limited ability as a parent. In baptizing my children, I accepted my responsibility to raise them in this faith and to model Christian life for them. But I felt that in baptizing them, it was my chance to go on record to say, officially, "These children are yours, God, they belong to you."

In the reading from the gospel of Mark this morning, we heard the story of Jesus's baptism. John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River and Jesus hears a voice from heaven that says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." In this passage, God tells Jesus who he is. Jesus is God's child, and not just any child, but God's **Beloved** child, with whom he is well pleased. Mark uses this passage to open the story of Jesus's life. Whereas the other gospels begin with Jesus's birth as a baby, Mark begins with Jesus's spiritual birth.

As I grow in my faith, my interpretations of scripture change too. There was a time when I thought that only Jesus could be God's beloved child. I somehow had the idea that although the rest of us were children of God who were loved in some sort of generic sense, we were not loved as much as Jesus. On some level, I believed that if I tried harder to be good and to serve God in more ways, that I could make God love me more. Maybe I could never be loved as much as Jesus, but perhaps God would still love me a little more if I worked at it.

I don't believe that anymore, but I also have to say that much of what I know about being beloved, I learned from Henri Nouwen. Nouwen was a Catholic priest and writer who taught classes at Harvard and Yale before he joined a community that ministered to handicapped people. The idea of being beloved by God is a recurring theme throughout Nouwen's writings, especially in his books *The Return of the Prodigal Son* and *Life of the Beloved*. In *Life of the Beloved*, Henri Nouwen explains what he

means when he says WE are Beloved. Not just Jesus, but all of us. Being Beloved means that God says to each of us, "I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me...wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one."

In using words and phrases from the Psalms and New Testament, Nouwen helps me see how deeply we all are loved. There's nothing I could possibly do to make God love me more than this. Even if I somehow became the first female, non-Catholic, married Pope with children, God would not love me more. If I became homeless and lived in my car, God would not love me less. God already loves all of us more than we could ever love ourselves. God's deepest love is already ours, whether we are able to accept it for ourselves or not.

For me, the most important aspect of Jesus's baptism story is that he HEARS God's voice and he accepts God's love for him. The miracle for me is not that God speaks to him and says that Jesus is beloved, but that Jesus can hear God. Because I believe God speaks the same thing to each one of us; God wishes us to hear that we are beloved children as well. But whereas Jesus had this moment when he could clearly hear God, most of us struggle with deafness. Even though the Bible gives us countless stories and descriptions of God's love and even though we live in a world filled with beauty and wonder and even though we go through life receiving all kinds of blessings both seen and unseen, still, somehow, we struggle to hear that its true, that we are God's beloved children.

Maybe for some of us, we refuse to accept how deeply we are loved because we don't think we are worthy of it. I know that has sometimes been the case for me. After I resolve all my personal problems, become completely unselfish, stop yelling at my kids, learn to love like Jesus, and start a ministry like Mother Theresa, THEN I'll be ready to be beloved. Then I will deserve such a love, because then of course I will be perfect. But if I'm being realistic, I have to give up my perfectionist fantasies and see that all I'm ever going to have is my extremely imperfect self. And if I'm ever going to accept that I am God's beloved child, then it might as well be now. As they say, if not now, then when?

There's a funny story that goes with Henri Nouwen's book, *Life of the Beloved*. The reason Nouwen wrote the book is that he had a very good friend who was not religious who asked, "Why don't you write something about the spiritual life for me and my friends?" So Nouwen set out to write a book from his heart that would speak to his non-religious friends about God. And the main thing he wanted to tell them is that they were God's beloved children. After Nouwen wrote the book, he sent it to his friend. The bad news was that the book really wasn't that meaningful to his friend. Nouwen thought he'd failed, and wondered what he should do with the book. Should he try to rewrite it? Go ahead and publish it anyway? The answer came when he sent the book

to a few people who were Christians, and they responded very enthusiastically to it. In trying to write a book for non-Christians, what he'd actually done was write a helpful book for Christians, and it has become one of his most popular books. Ironically, it was all of us inside the church who most needed to hear how deeply we are loved.

I think that accepting our belovedness is really a lifelong process. You're probably not going to fully get it today. Maybe not tomorrow either. I'm always working on it for myself too. But it seems to me that as Christians who follow Jesus, accepting that we are God's beloved children is something that we are supposed to do. Its difficult to love your enemies and your neighbors when you're not really convinced that God loves you. Its hard to convince anyone else that God loves them, when you struggle with it yourself. And its hard to love God when you're so busy running around proving to God that you're loveable. Once you can accept that you already have God's deepest love, it opens up a bigger space in you to love others.

I'm going to end the sermon reminding you again of how much you are already loved. This time, I want you to listen to the words and instead of thinking that these are words intended for the person sitting next to you, pretend that God is actually speaking them to you. Not to me, not to all the other people who need to hear them more, but to you. God doesn't need you to become perfect first, God speaks these words to you exactly as you are, in whatever place you are. If you'd like to, you can close your eyes if that helps you to hear God better.

"I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me...wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one." Amen.

