

Persistent Reminders That We Are God's Beloved

By: Stephanie Doeschot

January 12, 2020. Our interim resident pastor, Stephanie Doeschot, is ending her time with us very soon. Today, in one of her last sermons for us, she again reminds us that we are all beloved children of God.

*** Transcript ***

Grace to you and peace from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Just to put your minds at ease, if you were here last week and either witnessed or heard about my little episode with overheating and dehydration, I'm going to take a large drink of water right now. [Takes a drink.] There, that's done. It is fitting anyway to talk about water today, since we are looking at the baptism of Jesus -- and baptism always requires water. Here in this church it requires very little, but water is essential. You may have heard this analogy before, but some have likened the practice of baptism to some of the branches of the military. Some Christian churches are like the Navy: they love a lot of water. They would be like the Baptists, who require full immersion for a legitimate baptism. Others are like the Army, who deal only with small amounts of water such as we have here in the baptismal font. A sprinkling of water will do, and that suits us just fine. Other churches are like the Marines. They operate on either land or sea, so they will do immersions or sprinkling. It's all the same to them. Regardless of the mode, all in the church see water as a means to communicate that we are washed in the forgiveness of Christ, and we emerge from either a lot or a little bit of water as people with a particular identity. In the rite of baptism, we are reminded of the great love that God has for us in Christ, and are called the beloved children of God.

I wonder, though, if that is the first thing we think about when we are asked to define ourselves. Think about it. Most often when we think about who we are, and someone asks us, we answer with some version of "I am what I do." I work in an office. I paint houses. I sell real estate. I teach children. I perform surgeries. I write music. I clean homes. I go to school. Those are all fine, important things to do. But what we do doesn't define us. It tells something about how we spend some of our time, but it's still not truly who we are at the core. And that's a good thing, because what happens when a job gets outsourced, or we become disabled? Then, seeing ourselves as what we do becomes very, very inadequate.

Another way we may describe who we are might be well, "Here is what people say about me." And we could list the accolades and awards we've received and feel really, really good about ourselves. It's a powerful thing to have people speak well of us. But then what happens to our sense of ourselves when negative things are said about us? If our identities are tied to what is said about us, we'll be on a very, very narrow balance beam, because no one hears only positive things about themselves. And studies have shown that a person can get ten compliments in a week, but if there's that one insult or criticism or negative comment that strikes at their heart about their character or something they've done, that is likely what they'll remember the most.

Another way we can view ourselves is to think, "I am what I have." I have things that make my life enjoyable: good health, good friends, and family. That too is all well and good until losses come, and they do come in every life. What if I lose some of what I have that most defines me? When our identities come from what we do, what people say about us, or what we have, we are set up for living a roller coaster life. Because all these things vary throughout life, and they will at some points fail us, because they are a poor substitute for understanding where our true identity lies.

Henri Nouwen, in his book *The Life Of The Beloved*, reminds us that Jesus was tempted to define himself in every one of those three categories, in what we call the Temptations of Jesus in the Wilderness. The first temptation that Jesus faced was to define himself by what he did. If you'll remember, the tempter whispered, "Turn these stones into bread, and then you'll really be somebody." Jesus refused. The second temptation Jesus faced was for him to uphold his reputation as Son of God and test God by jumping from the top of the temple. Again, Jesus refused. The third temptation came when he was shown all the kingdoms of the world. If only Jesus would bow down and worship Satan, he was promised, then Jesus could have it all. Jesus once again refused. Jesus responded to each of these lies of the false narratives of his true identity in each case. At his core he knew he was not what he did. He was not about keeping up a reputation based on a distorted self-image. And he could not be defined by what he had or did not have.

The story of his baptism precedes these temptations for a very good reason. It was in the context of our baptism story today that Jesus could say no to the wrong ways of identifying himself, and say yes to his true identity throughout his earthly life. It was through his baptism that he heard these sweet and all-powerful words that told him most clearly who he was: "You are my beloved and with you I am well pleased." That message guided Jesus' three-year ministry that followed. Whether he was able to see a person receive wholeness or wellness that he had to offer, or when he was met with stubborn resistance to God's love, he kept hearing the voice that told him he was God's beloved. Whether Jesus faced warm welcomes or was met by angry crowds, he kept hearing the voice that told him he was God's beloved. When he had a sumptuous meal at the home of friends, or when he said he had no place to lay his head, he kept on hearing the voice that told him he was God's beloved. That is the same message that you and I need to hear about ourselves, because it is the truth that we affirm in our baptisms. It is the truth about the way God views each and every one of us. We are God's beloved.

Now, in a few weeks my time of serving as your interim resident pastor will conclude. As I move forward from our time together, I will take with me so very many good memories of conversations and interactions with you as a congregation. You have enriched my life through your faith and witness to the gospel of grace, that has clearly formed you as the beloved people of God. Honestly, you are just some of the best people I've ever been privileged to know. And I've been alive for a very long time and I've known a lot of people, so I do not say that lightly. You do demonstrate well what it means to be the beloved children of God.

One of the many conversations that will stick with me long after I depart occurred in my office with the Mudd family, as we talked about the baptism of Rick in early December. Not only were parents Philip and Sarah well-prepared to bring their son to receive baptism, they had also

prepared his big sister Katie well for the occasion. Two-year-old Katie confidently answered her parents when they asked her to tell me what was going to happen to Rick soon. "He's going to be baptized," she answered. And then this: "And Katie, what will we call Rick then?" "A child of God." Well, we did not need to talk any longer about the theological implications of baptism after that. I did not have any more questions for the parents, because they were clearly telling their two-year-old Katie about her own identity in Christ, and also how her brother was to be identified. Both were told that they were the children of God, God's own beloved ones. Rick (eight months old at his baptism) may not have heard the words telling him that day that he is God's beloved, but I can well imagine that his parents and sister, all of you, will continue to tell him, and then tell him again as he grows up, that he is a child of God. Every time he sees others baptized he can remember that just as that person is proclaimed a child of God, all of these people and more, that also describes his fundamental identity.

We all need persistent reminders that the truth about us from God's perspective -- the perspective that matters the most -- is that we are God's beloved. We are cherished. We are safe, and ultimately well and tethered to the source of life and love. We are made in God's image. And just as God proclaimed when creating all things, God delights in us and calls us created beings very, very good. Imagine for yourself that you hear these words from God: you are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased. There are additional words that have been addressed to us from God throughout the Bible. Here are just a few: I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have written your name on the palms of my hands. I have knitted you together in your mother's womb. Precious. That's what you and I and all people are to God. Beloved. God's own children in whom God delights.

Can we carry that message with us as the dominant way we see ourselves, day in and day out, year in and year out, in the good times and not-so-good times? God gives us that message because it frees us from the baggage of ill-fitting and destructive identities. It is most truly who we are, independent of other voices and circumstances. Embracing the identity of "beloved child of God" is the only way we can love God and love others who are also beloved children of God. It is from a place of deep security that we are cherished, that we can live the full life that God wants us to have. But granted, it's a lifelong journey to claim that identity and live into it.

In closing I share with you a poem written by Jan Richardson. It's entitled "Beloved is Where We Begin."

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.

Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path

before you.

Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence

whisper our name:

Beloved.

Beloved.

Beloved.

As you come forward later for communion, you may want to dip your fingers in the water to remind yourself that you truly are the beloved of God. I encourage you to do whatever it takes to repeat that mantra to yourself, so that that becomes truly the way you see yourself, because it gives great honor also to God.

Please rise now to sing our hymn of the day, and thanks to God.

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