

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
January 17, 2009

A journalist named Fred came to do an interview of a Catholic priest and theologian teaching at Yale Divinity School. The theologian describes his feelings during the interview, "I quickly found myself taken hold of by a mixture of irritation and fascination. I was irritated because it was clear that this journalist was not terribly interested in what he was doing...It was a journalist's job that had to be done, but could easily be done without. Nevertheless, there was also an element of fascination because I sensed, behind the mask of indifference, a spirit fully alive—eager to learn and to create. I somehow knew that I was face to face with a man full of great personal gifts, anxiously searching for a way to use them." As the interview ends, the theologian suddenly asks the journalist, "Tell me, do you like your job?" The journalist responds, "No not really, but it's a job."

A tense, but vulnerable conversation follows. It leads to the theologian unexpectedly blurting out, to this man he has just met, "Fred, give up your job, come live at the seminary for a year and write your novel. I will get the money somehow." Fred objects, "I am a Jew, and this is a Christian seminary." The theologian says, "We will make you a scholar in residence... You can do what you like... People here will love having a novelist in the house and meanwhile you can learn something about Christianity and Judaism too." A few months later Fred came to Yale Divinity School and spent a year there. What emerged from that year was not a novel, but a lifelong friendship between Fred (a secular Jew) and the theologian and priest, Henri Nouwen.

Years later, walking on Columbus Avenue in New York City, Fred asked, "Why don't you write something about the spiritual life for me and my friends..... You have something to say, but you keep saying it to people who least need to hear it.... What about us young, ambitious, secular men and women wondering what life is all about after all? Can you speak to us with the same conviction as you speak to those who share your tradition, your language, and your vision?" Nowen thinks he is not up to the task, that his life is too small to do it. But he keeps hearing the same plea coming to him from a variety of sources: "Speak to us about a vision larger than our changing perspectives and

about a voice deeper than the clamorings of our mass media. Yes, speak to us about something or someone greater than ourselves. Speak to us about...God.” He spends time with the secular young people and gets to know their lives. Then he writes, “I have been wondering if there might be one word I would most want you to remember when you finished reading all I wish to say. Over the past year, that special word has gradually emerged from the depths of my own heart. It is the word, “Beloved.”

The book Nouwen goes on to write is entitled *Life of the Beloved*.

In some ways, it seems incongruous to talk about belovedness on a day like today, after we have seen such vivid images of the suffering of the people of Haiti. Intangibles like love may seem so insubstantial when people need food, clean water, medicine, bandages, money.

But I think back to the results of scientists’ research, which shows that when infants in an orphanage have every physical need met, but are not held or cuddled or spoken to, the infants often simply die. They literally die when they do not feel beloved. And the reverse is also true, there are many infants who feel that they are beloved from the very beginning, and that sense of being beloved is what enables them to overcome all kinds of adversity, even inadequate nutrition or physical suffering. In Haiti, those who face grief and poverty are much better able to do so if they have within themselves a sense that they are beloved. In the United States, those who see the suffering on TV are much better able to respond with generosity, so that people’s physical needs are met, if they have within themselves a sense that we are beloved.

Nouwen goes on to talk about the words Jesus hears from God at his baptism: “You are my beloved.” As he reflects on his friendship with Fred, he expresses this conviction: “The words, “You are my Beloved” revealed the most intimate truth about all human beings, whether they belong to any particular tradition or not. Fred, all I want to say to you is “You are the Beloved,” and all I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being—“You are the Beloved.”

And that is the main message of today’s sermon to each of you: “You are the Beloved. You are the Beloved. You are the Beloved.”

Over the course of our lives, we have all heard the opposite messages, that we are not capable enough, not attractive enough, not good enough, not successful enough. Over the course of our lives, we have all been insulted or rejected by other people. And if your experience is like mine, some of those insults and rejections lodge in your memory and get replayed there multiple times, especially when you are feeling most vulnerable, so that even when other people are quiet, you end up insulting yourself.

Today's Old Testament scripture speaks to that situation, and gives us some visual images to help us picture how beloved we are.

You shall be called by a new name
 that the mouth of the LORD will give.
 You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
 and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
 You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
 and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
 but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
 and your land Married;
 for the LORD delights in you,
 and your land shall be married.
 For as a young man marries a young woman,
 so shall your builder marry you,
 and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
 so shall your God rejoice over you.

It may be that the people in you work with or interact with have forgotten to tell you lately that you are a crown of beauty. But, since you have come to church today, you get to hear the truth: You are a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord. You shall be called My Delight Is in Her. You are the Beloved.

I believe it is important that we have prayers of confession, in which we confess our sins and ask God to forgive us. I also believe that it is important to have prayers like this one by Marianne Williamson which says, "Lord, help me to see the truth about myself, no matter how beautiful it is."

We may be afraid that if we think about how beloved we are, it might cause us to become arrogant. But the reverse is true. The people who are arrogant always turn out to be people who use arrogance to cover up feelings of inadequacy, people who work so

hard to avoid being seen as they see themselves. The times when we feel our belovedness most deeply are the times when we do not need to resort to arrogance.

What would it be like if we looked in the mirror and instead of noticing the things we don't like about our face or body, we instead said. You are a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord. You are the beloved.

Even for Nouwen himself, this is a hard truth to take in. As he admits, "Though the experience of being the Beloved has never been completely absent from my life, I have never claimed it as my core truth. I kept running around it in large or small circles, always looking for something or someone able to convince me of my Belovedness. It was as if I kept refusing to hear the voice that speaks from the very depth of my being and says: "You are my beloved, on you my favor rests." That voice has always been there, but it seems that I was much more eager to listen to other, louder voices saying, "Prove that you are worth something; do something relevant, spectacular or powerful, and then you will earn the love you so desire." And so we spend our time working at proving that we are worthy of love. Or we spend our time trying to change other people, thinking that if they change, we will finally have a feeling of belovedness.

And when we expend our energy in those ways we are likely not to notice that what we most yearn for is, in reality, what we already have. We have had it since God knit us together in our mother's womb. You are Beloved. You have always been beloved. You always will be beloved.

Ironically, this is what makes all forms of love possible. As Nouwen writes, "The greatest gift my friendship can give to you is the gift of your Belovedness. I can give that gift only insofar as I have claimed it for myself. Isn't that what friendship is all about: giving to each other the gift of our belovedness.

The season of Epiphany is when we celebrate God's revelation to us and to the whole world. Jesus is a revelation of who God is, and God begins Jesus' ministry by telling him at his baptism he is beloved. But it does not stop there. The good news of the gospel that Jesus preaches is that you are beloved. You are beloved. Take in your belovedness. Believe it.