



THE BELOVED OF GOD

CCUMC
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And a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved, with whom I am well-pleased.” I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: You are God’s beloved.

You are God’s beloved. What’s it like to hear that? Is it wonderful? Is it terrible and terrifying? Is it both and neither and all sorts of other things? What’s it like to hear that you are beloved?

Jerry (Rick, Pete, Sherry, Elana, Mary, Sue, ..., ...) you are God’s beloved.

_____, you are God’s beloved. _____, you are God’s beloved. _____, you are God’s beloved.

That word – oh, that word ‘beloved’ means every inch of what it sounds like. In Koine, or N.T. Greek, the word is *agapetos*, which means loved with *agape*. How many of you have heard the word *agape* before? Do you remember what it means? -- It’s a love that is deep, active, self-sacrificing, and absolutely unconditional – no strings attached. It’s a love that doesn’t ever have to be earned. We can’t ‘deserve’ this love. This love just is.

As much as we wish it was, I think that for most of us, this is not what our experience of love is. Most of us have learned to believe that we have to earn love – from God, from each other, from our parents, spouses, from the world. But that’s not what being beloved of God means. Being god’s beloved is about being loved unconditionally and without having to earn it. Another word for it is ‘Grace.’

It’s especially hard to believe that that kind of love can be found in the church, because for centuries the church has taught the exact opposite; be good – and you can go to heaven. We have turned our relationship with God into an economic transaction, just like all the other transactions in our lives.

But that’s not what the Gospel says. When we read the Gospel we learn that the God’s relationship with us is the most unfair, unbalanced economic transaction of all time. You see, these are the terms: God gives us life and unconditional, *agape* love. And we have to give God – nothing.

That’s right, nothing is demanded of us in return. There is nothing we can do to make God not love us. God will never stop loving you; nothing will cause that love to be taken away. Instead, we get an invitation – an invitation that we are free to embrace or ignore. God invites us to just trust in the gift – to trust in the active, unconditional, no-strings-attached love that god has for each one of us. Just trust in it, that’s all.

Sounds great! Sign me up! But as you know it's not that easy. Simple, yes, but not easy. And the problem isn't God, of course, it's us. If you're like me, hearing God say 'you are by beloved' – well ...sometimes -- frequently, in fact – I'm just not sure I believe it.

I mean there's nothing I crave more than being loved that deeply -- that unconditionally; but I'm not sure I can trust that I'm that loveable – that that kind of love is out there for me just because I am, and not because of anything I do. You know what I mean?

In fact, trusting that love is so hard, that we can't do it alone. God's unconditional love for us is so hard for us to trust that we need each other to remind us of it and to help us to trust it. That is what the church is supposed to be. That's who we are supposed to be.

I talk about it all the time; we call ourselves the body of Christ. That means we are the Beloved community. That means that the same way God looked at Jesus and said 'This is my beloved,' God looks at all of us and says the same thing. This – these – are my beloved. You – we -- are God's beloved.

So what does that mean? What does it mean that we're the beloved community? I'll tell you what it doesn't mean: It doesn't mean that God loves Christians best. I joke around sometimes and say "Jesus loves you – but I'm his favorite!" It's a joke! God has no favorites (Romans 2:11, Acts 10:34, Col 3:25). God's *agape*, God's unconditional, no-strings-attached love is poured out on all creation, and not just for baptized Christians.

Now I'm not saying that our baptism doesn't mean anything. It does. Just like Jesus, being baptized into the beloved community means that we are a part of a community who does what Jesus did that day at the Jordan – who hears that voice that says, 'You are my beloved' – who hears that voice and is willing to follow the Spirit out into the wilderness (both metaphorically and literally), and trust that God is talking about all of us – the whole world – you are God's beloved.

Maybe it takes a little practice. Let's take just that first one. Being part of the beloved community is hearing that voice speaking to us. Let's try it. Find somebody near you and get into pairs. If you have to get up and move that's ok. If you have to do it with three, that's ok too.

Now look into the other persons eyes and repeat after me: "You are God's beloved."

Great! Now do it again, "You are God's beloved." One more time, "You are God's beloved."

Now this can be really difficult and uncomfortable. If you're like me, part of you is ready to weep for joy, and part of you is saying, "Yeah, right." But let's just try to trust that voice for a second. Just for second, trust that you really are God's beloved.

if you trust that you really are God's beloved, if you trust that the most powerful being in the universe loves you without strings, without limits, without merit; and that love will never go away – or as I'm fond of saying, "God loves you and there's nothing you can do about it" – then nothing that matters can be taken away from you. You know what that means? That means that there is no reason to fear anything. "Be not afraid" -- "Fear not for I am with you." there's nothing that can hold you back. Life itself can be taken from you and it won't matter if you trust that you are now and always will be God's beloved child.

So that's the first thing we're about as God's beloved community: helping each other trust that we really are God's beloved. Now here's the second thing: and the second thing isn't any easier. The second thing we're about is remembering that not only am I God's beloved, but everyone else in this beloved community is, too. Being a beloved community means looking around this room and looking each other in the eye and not just hearing those words for ourselves but saying:

...are you black or white or something else? You are God's beloved.

...are you democrat or republican or something else? You are God's beloved.

...are you heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or something else? You are God's beloved.

...are you rich or poor, male or female, young or old, employed or unemployed, married, partnered, divorced, widowed or single? I think you get the point -- You are God's beloved.

Being a Christ-centered community -- being this beloved community means we not only see ourselves as Christ sees us, but that we see each other as beloved of God as well. It means that the first thing we think when we see each other, hear each other, talk to each other, even email each other, is "Wow – I'm talking to a child of God."

There's a common form of greeting among the Hindus of south Asia – you've probably heard it as Americans get more interest in eastern spiritual practices. The word is "Namaste." Anyone? It means "I bow to the divine in you – I acknowledge the divine spark in you."

It's imagining that everyone we see has a tattoo on their forehead: "Brad – God's beloved." "Rick – God's beloved." "Pete, Greg, Mary – God's beloved."

And we treat each other with that same love, not because we're earning some sort of heavenly brownie points, but because when we look at each other, and before seeing anything else, we see someone beloved by God just like we are. It is our great joy to remind them of it, and to be a part of God's love for them.

What we don't hear about in this reading is what happens next? We'll talk about it later as we move toward lent, but does anybody remember? What happens after Jesus gets baptized? I touched on it earlier...

That same spirit that called Jesus 'beloved' leads him out into the wilderness. A few words about the wilderness: this is no Jellystone Park with talking bears and pic-a-nic baskets. The wilderness is a scary place. It's dangerous. Things can eat you in the wilderness. But that's where Christ gets sent. And that, my friends, is where we get sent. The Christ –centered church, the beloved community gets sent to the wilderness because even though it's scary, if we believe we are God's beloved, we live without fear. But most importantly, we get sent to the wilderness because that's where god's other beloved are, too.

Why? Because meeting god's beloved in the wilderness is what we do.

So first, we are God's beloved. Second, everyone else in this community is God's beloved. And third, the whole world is God's beloved.

I get asked all the time what my vision is for this church. Well this is it: it's not flashy. It's not complicated. It's being Christ-centered and Christ-sent. It's being a beloved – the beloved -- community.

It's being a community who through prayer and study hear more and more God's voice saying 'You are beloved' – growing less fearful every day and trusting more and more that it's true.

It's being a people who look at each other and see, before anything else, someone who God adores – seeing the divine in all of God's creation, and trying a little harder each day to be part of that adoration.

Amen.