

**First Presbyterian Church
Matthew 3:16, 17, Psalm 100
Being the Beloved, 9/4/2022**

Well, hi there! How's it going? It seems like it's been a while, right?

I'm just so incredibly grateful for each of you, and especially for the staff,
for Pastor Steve Parker, and for the session and deacons.

You all stepped up in different ways, some of those ways
I'll hear about, but without doubt the majority
of your labors this summer will simply remain
between you and the Lord.

For all the seen and unseen service that contributed to this Sabbatical summer,
I give thanks.

I am so genuinely excited to be back with you.

It was so good to have an extended time away and that time was wonderful.

This was the first time I have had a sabbatical in 15 years
of pastoral ministry.

It was ... extravagant.

At times embarrassingly so. Because of the Lilly Clergy Renewal Program,
we were able to go places and see things and eat meals that
would have simply not been possible otherwise.

The available resources were astounding.

Fishing on the Deschutes, a week in Alaska,
a week painting with a nationally renowned artist, the Metolius River,
a gathering with my family, Sonja's parent's 50th anniversary,
Scotland, Stockholm, a family reunion in Estonia,
and then a few nights by myself in Yachats
to reflect on it all.

It was truly lavish, and to be honest...

I really loved it.

Because of all this, I have ... not been here for a very long time.

But my reason for being away is that I love you. I love this congregation.

In order for me to truly live into that love,

I also have to love and care for myself.

That is not only true for me ... it's also true for you and those that you love.

I wonder when you last took time to really care for yourself?

When did you last let yourself recharge for an extended time
and not be so over-responsible?

Now, maybe you aren't able to take a 3 month break

from your daily responsibilities. I know that's a rare thing.

But you are worthy of love. You are worthy of rest and restoration.

You are loved and you are worthy of love that is tangibly known to you.

Today we're going to think about what it means to be
someone who is loved.

Now you might think that's an easy thing to do,

but I'm here to say that it just isn't so.

Because we all collect names over our years,

and some of them we may choose for ourselves,

but a lot of them are chosen by others,

and many of them tell us that we are something

other than beloved.

When Micah was a toddler, he would often ask me, "Is your name ...?"

"Is your name ... [Gaba do-doo ha-ha]?"

Sometimes I would just say, "Yes, that's my name." And he would say, "It is?"

These were the names I had that nobody else knew about.

It was a funny game that we played with each other years ago,

but the truth is that we all have names that nobody else knows about.

We pick up these names from other people,
who give them to us without knowing it.

We pick them up from our family, from friends, who tell us what we're good at,
what we're not, what we screw up, and what we get right.

We get them from ourselves as we compare ourselves to others around us
and allow our pride or our jealousy and envy to attach
to a character trait we find in ourselves.

These are the names that we then internalize, and carry around with us,
and repeat to ourselves as we go through life.

Champ, trooper, loser, tough guy, skinny girl, fat kid, brainiac,
dummy, screw up, go getter, good for nothing, hottie, overachiever.
Think about the names you acquired in life...

Some of these are names we are proud of, some of them are names that shame us.

Jesus was given a name before he was born.

Jesus -- from the Hebrew Joshua or Yeshua, which means "God Saves."
That's a pretty important name all on its own.

But then he got one of these other names, a name that he took deep within him,
and which is present in all his relationships with both God
and the people he meets in Galilee, Jerusalem,
and other places along the way.

This name is given to him at his baptism, in the words of God the Father
from heaven, "This is my son whom I love, with him I am well pleased."

Is your name, "My son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased?"

Yes, Jesus would tell the toddler Micah. Yes, that is my name.

What's your name?

What is the core identity that you fall back on when times are good,
when times are stressful, when you are completely worn out,
when there's a decision to make and you don't know what to do?

Wouldn't it be great if our name was,
"My daughter, whom I love, with her I am well pleased?"

But that's crazy, right? Because that's Jesus' name.
We couldn't get a name like that.

We get names that are marred with all our incompleteness
and insecurity and selfishness and pride.

We have to work for years to make a name for ourselves.

We can't have Jesus' name. It belongs ... to Jesus.

That's where I want to turn to Henri Nouwen.

"Beneath all my seemingly strong self-confidence there remained the question: "If all those who shower me with so much attention could see me and know me in my innermost self, would they still love me?" That agonizing question, kept in my inner shadow, kept persecuting me and made me run away from the very place where that quiet voice-- calling me the beloved -- could be heard."

It seems presumptuous to say that we could be called the beloved children of God,
taking the name that Jesus was given at his baptism, but this,

I truly believe is what the good news is all about!

This is the whole point -- that we take on an identity

that is both beyond us in all our failures

and is deeply rooted in the fact that we are made in the image of God.

Through the grace of God we have access to a new way of being.

Consider again the words of Nouwen, in this letter he writes to his friend:

**“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.”
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?”**

We can only share the gift of belovedness with others if we have claimed it for ourselves.

Jesus knew he was loved and accepted being beloved.
That’s why he could love so well.

At the opposite extreme we have become too familiar with the stories of those who lash out in violence through public shootings.
Young men who have taken on unlovable names.
They believe themselves to be despised by others,
targets of constant abuse, and maybe they have been.
But this is internalized until they have so little self-regard
that they only want to unleash revenge and suffering on others.

Friends, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable enough to feel and know love is important. It is important for the whole world.

The Psalms know about this.

Psalm 100 is an unapologetic declaration of our belovedness,
that God made us, that we belong to God, that God is good,
and God’s love is for us
and all that lavish love endures forever.

The prayer life of Israel was steeped in declarations of belovedness before God.

Hearing and speaking and praying about God's love didn't make Israel arrogant,
or lazy, or overly comfortable.

No, Israel lost its way when it sought
to live into the names spoken by other nations.

Taking this identity of being God's beloved deep within them was the source
of all the goodness that ever came out of Israel,
and it's true for the church as well.

You cannot spoil yourself with too much of God's love,
because God's love simply does not spoil.

What do you need to know that you are loved?

What can we do for you as the church to remind you of your worthiness?

What might help you hear the name that God has for you?

What I was reminded of while away on Sabbatical is that I am loved...
and I love you.

I love this congregation.

The greatest gift we can give to one another
is a deep, abiding awareness of our own belovedness.

So say this aloud after me: "I am loved."

And now look at a child of God sitting near you and say, "I love you."