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Waterford Mennonite Church
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1 John 3:16-24

Today we continue in our six week series on the book of 1 John which is a pastoral letter to a faith community. We could imagine that John has stepped back, taken stock of what is going on, and then sets about writing this very pastoral letter that is full of reflections, counsel, and direction. We read of confirmation, affirmation, and challenge. Through the words we can hear of the deep appreciation and affection John has for this struggling faith community.

This morning we move to chapter three where we receive again this command: believe in the name of God's son, Jesus Christ, and love one another as God commanded us. Earlier in the passage we are reminded that Jesus laid down his life for us, so now we too should lay down our lives for others. The conversation then begins with this poignant reminder that we are the beloved of God. We have been loved, and so we love. We are called God's beloved, and so we reach out to others out of our belovedness as we name and claim the other's belovedness in God.

Perhaps you have never considered yourself God's beloved? This title could be translated as one that is dearly loved by God. *Beloved*. Perhaps though it is hard to hear this quiet reminder from the Spirit when the voices around us are so busy loudly shouting other names at us. And yet, today in the stillness we hear this reminder, we are the beloved of God.

Jan Richardson is a Methodist Pastor and author of numerous books. In one of her recent books she includes her poem entitled "Beginning with Beloved" which I will share with you now.

Beginning with Beloved by Jan Richardson

Begin here:

Beloved.

Is there any other word
needs saying,

any other blessing
could compare
with this name,
this knowing?

Beloved.

Comes like a mercy
to the ear that has never
heard it.

Comes like a river
to the body that has never
seen such grace.

Beloved.

Comes holy
to the heart
aching to be new.

Comes healing
to the soul
waiting to begin
again.

Beloved.

Keep saying it,
and though it may
sound strange at first,
watch how it becomes part of you,
as if you never
could have known yourself
anything else,
as if you could ever
have been other
than this:

Beloved.¹

How does it feel to consider that you are God's beloved? How have you embraced this truth, and how have you resisted it? Many of you are familiar with the writings of Henri Nouwen. I have been deeply influenced by his small book entitled "Life of the Beloved." This book is set up as an extended letter to one of his friends, a younger man named Fred. In a way similar to the context of first John, Nouwen has stepped back, assessed the situation, and

responds to Fred and his friends with reflections, counsel, and wisdom. He is propelled by his deep and abiding affection for Fred and their relationship.

Fred came from a different faith tradition and asked Nouwen to write a book that would speak to his heart and the soul concerns he was wrestling with. In the beginning of the letter to Fred, Nouwen writes this: “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 as force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being – “You are the Beloved.”ⁱⁱ

Beloved. Loved. Cherished. Desired. Beloved. Beloved in birth. Beloved in life. Beloved in death. Beloved in resurrection. Claiming our belovedness keeps us firmly rooted as ones who have been created by God, sustained by God, and fully welcomed by God. It reminds me of one of my favorite psalms, Psalm 139. Here the psalmist joyfully and with great wonder declares how we are known by God as the one who knit us together in our birth mother’s wombs. And then the psalmist reminds us of the promise that where we go, there is God. To the highest heights, or the deepest depths, God is there with us, reminding us that we are God’s beloved. These reminders then help us turn to others as we too are reminded of their belovedness in God.

Last Sunday we had the joy of joining Josiah and Laurina Graber-Ditzler as they presented Matilda to be dedicated to God before their faith body. Pastor Katie gently walked Matilda around the sanctuary, introducing us to this sweet little one who is part of us. We joined the imaginative exercise of what will come for Matilda as she grows up in our faith family. Oh if Matilda could talk I wonder what words of counsel she would have given to us if she could see the church in 18 years when she is graduating from high school? In the presence of new life, clearly evident in the miracle of a baby, we are reminded of our belovedness.

The other end of life's journey is also true. In the face of our own mortality and death we are reminded of our belovedness. Beloved in birth. Beloved in life. Beloved in death. Beloved in resurrection.

A couple weeks ago at pastoral team meeting Pastor Katie shared about an experience at Raleigh Mennonite Church in North Carolina. There was a man in the congregation who was dying and it was arranged that on different occasions the congregation would Skype with this man during the worship service. During these occasions the gentleman would address the children of the church and share his reflections with them about dying, living, believing, and belonging. Katie shared that these reflections might not have been the most profound in and of themselves, but they opened up a new avenue for conversation, reflection, and powerful sharing within the faith community. In some ways it was like the context of 1 John, of one stepping back, taking stock, and offering insights and reflections.

Well Katie's sharing sparked ideas among the pastoral team and Pastor Velma reached out to Russ and Cathy Hochstetler to inquire if they would desire to share such reflections with their faith community. Cathy is receiving hospice care following a terminal cancer diagnosis. They have been among us for years and are loved and respected. They are also Beth Smucker's parents, and grandparents to Matthew, Anna, and Andrew. Well, to our delight they said yes, they would be willing to be interviewed if we would welcome their reflections. And so in just a minute we will share with you their video interview. As we do so I acknowledge our regret that we didn't have this idea years before as each person who has joined the great cloud of witnesses would also have had a meaningful word for us to hear. Going forward it is Velma's desire to begin asking others to consider participating in such interviews.

As we listen to Russ and Cathy's words may we hear their message, receive their reflections, and share in their belovedness. Beloved in birth. Beloved in life. Beloved in death. Beloved in resurrection. Following the video we will have a moment of silence to ponder what we have heard.

(show video)

(Moment of silence)

Treasured words of reflection, wisdom, and counsel. Words that remind us of our belovedness. Beloved in birth. Beloved in life. Beloved in death. Beloved in resurrection. Words that remind us how Jesus loves all the children of the world. Words that remind us that God is with us on the highest of heights and in the deepest of depths.

This week I read this quote that deeply challenged me. "And every day, the world will drag you by the hand, yelling, 'This is important! And this is important! And this is important! You need to worry about this! And this! And this!' And each day, it's up to you to yank your hand back, put it on your heart and say, 'No. This is what's important.'" This morning I would slightly modify the quote by saying "And each day, it's up to you to yank your hand back, put it on your heart, and say, 'No. I will rest in knowing I am God's beloved.'"

This morning as we rest in this truth we also proclaim God's faithfulness throughout the seasons of our lives. From birth, to life, to death, to resurrection. God is faithful, God is present, God calls us God's beloved.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Jan Richardson, *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief* (Wanton Gospeller Press: Orlando, Florida), 99-100.

ⁱⁱ Henri Noewen, *Life of the Beloved* (Crossroad: New York City, New York), 26.