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Trust Our Belovedness

Mark 1:4-11

Have you ever been upset or really anxious or worried and someone yelled at you to “just calm down?” There are lots of memes made for just this instance. (show memes) For the most part, it doesn’t help, does it? Most of us, when we are smack in the middle of feeling upset, can’t “just calm down” because we are too in the middle of not being calm.

But, maybe if we have practiced ways to calm ourselves down, things like: breathing techniques, meditation and prayer, soothing music, asking for a hug or using a weighted blanket, then, if when we are upset we can remember to do those things, we might be able to use those practices to calm down. And, if someone who knows us came up to us while we were upset and instead of yelling to just calm down, reminded us of what we’ve practiced like, “hey, remember your breathing exercises?” That might help.

I bring this up because today is the last day of our series on “How do we rejoice in a weary world?” and we’ve answered that question in a lot of different ways. We’ve talked about how to be able to rejoice in a weary world we seek connection with each other; we look for amazement and wonder in the world; we tell each other our stories; we make room for everyone; we root ourselves in the rituals of our faith and we notice the light of God in the world around us. And finally, in this last week of this series: we trust our belovedness.

But, as I thought about preaching on this theme today, I felt like having someone stand up in the sanctuary and say: “hey, you are a beloved child of God” could be a little like yelling at someone to “just calm down.” it’s not necessarily very helpful by itself.

Because so much of our days, we are exposed to a tremendous number of messages that are exactly the opposite of “you are a beloved child of God.” Messages which tell us we are not enough. We are not smart enough, fast enough, rich enough, in shape enough, together enough, loveable enough. These messages are the subtext of every advertisement. We absorb it through celebrity culture where we constantly compare ourselves to others. We may get these messages from teachers or employers. We may even get these messages from our friends and family.

Author “Henri Nouwen writes: “It certainly is not easy to hear (God’s) voice in a world filled with voices that shout: ‘You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable, you are nobody—unless you can demonstrate the opposite.’ These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them. That’s the great trap. It is the trap of self-rejection.”

And when we internalize these messages; when we take them to heart and believe them to be true, then it probably doesn’t do much to come to church and hear someone stand up one Sunday and say “you are beloved. You are a beloved child of God.” Hearing it once in the cacophony of all the other messages is not enough. If the vast majority of what we take in is all about how we aren’t enough, aren’t beloved, then one sermon about being beloved can’t possibly hope to sink in enough to make a difference.

Which is why this isn't just a message I hope you hear only today but one you've been hearing each and every time you come to Covenant. Maybe we don't say the exact words, you are a beloved child of God but our worship every week is built around practicing to trust our belovedness.

One place we practice every week this happens is in our prayer of confession, followed by the assurance of forgiveness. Together we acknowledge that we aren’t perfect – we make mistakes, we hurt each other, we make bad choices, we do the wrong thing sometimes. That’s the truth and reality of being human. But then through the assurance of forgiveness, we are reminded that God’s love isn’t conditional. One of the beautiful parts of the scripture today is that God tells Jesus he is beloved and God is well pleased with him before he has done anything, before he has begun his ministry. That is true for us as well. God’s love isn’t about how good or perfect we are. It isn’t in proportion to our mistakes or choices. It isn’t based on how productive we’ve been or what we’ve accomplished. God’s love isn’t based on how rich or popular or beautiful or smart or good or kind we are. We can't get more of God's love if we improve ourselves or achieve our new year’s resolutions. God’s love is not even “in spite” of all our foibles and sins. God’s love includes all of our foibles and sins. Our belovedness is baked into who we are, including all the things that make us human, even the troublesome parts. We are forgiven and loved. Period.

And there are other parts of worship where we are reminded of our belovedness. Our benediction at the end of the service reminds us to go out into the world with God’s love. We hear about how we are beloved in lots of scripture and we sing about it in our hymns. Sometimes it feels like God’s love might just be the basis for every sermon I give. Honestly, I hope that if you come here enough you will eventually get to a point where

you feel like you've heard it too much. Because we need to hear it enough that we really feel it down in our souls. We need to practice it enough here that when we go out of this sanctuary into all the messages that say otherwise, we can face those other messages, take a deep breath and call ourselves back to the truth. That when we are struggling or depressed; when we are feeling less than or even worthless: when we question and doubt our value; when we think maybe we are just unloveable; we can take a minute and come back to that place deep inside us that has practiced trusting that we are beloved and hold onto that. And hopefully, when we can't do that, there will be people in our lives, maybe people right here, who can look at us and see we are struggling and say to us, "hey, remember you are loved, you are good, you have so much to offer and bring to this world" and instead of it sounding like someone yelling nonsense at you, it will sound real and true.

Nadia Bolz Weber told this story in a recent sermon. She said, "I was in a 12 step meeting the other day when one of the old guys, a guy who has been sober for like, 45 years said something so simple and so casual but something that made me shake my head and wonder what it would be like if we all really believed it. As we were all discussing what our "higher power" is like, what the "God of our understanding" is like, he said "I don't know about you, but my God is crazy about me".

I couldn't stop thinking about that. For most of my life I've heard the saying "God loves you". But it always feels more like an empty slogan like, don't worry, be happy, or something. For someone to say, Nadia, God loves you, feels almost compulsory. Like God loves me kinda because he has to since I'm one of his kids. But to say my God is crazy about me. I don't know. That's different.

That feels like the kind of pure Gospel love the heavens could not contain and it just kind of has to spill out all over everything... The kind of love that breaks your heart and then makes it bigger, A love that creates belovedness in the one it rests upon."

That's what we are practicing – trusting that God is crazy about us; that God's love is beyond reason; that God's love is not in spite of us, but because of us; that God loves for who we are, not who we pretend to be.

Today, the way we are going to practice trusting our belovedness is by reaffirming our baptismal vows. We are going to come forward for anointing and be asked to remember our own baptism. We don't mean you have to remember the actual day and act of your baptism – many of us were infants and know only what we have been told, if anything. What we are asking you to remember is that you have been claimed as a beloved child of God. That just as in Jesus' baptism God's voice said "you are my beloved, with whom I am well pleased" that is true for each of us.

Together we will remember that “Our baptisms bind us to all of humanity — not in theory, but in the flesh — such that you and I are kin, responsible for each other in ways we fail so often to honor. We are called into radical solidarity, not radical separateness. In baptism, we are freed up to touch, embrace, and love all that is broken within and around us, precisely because we are always and already God's Beloved. We're beloved not because we've done anything to earn it, but because God's very nature, inclination, and desire is to love — and to birth that same kind of love in us.”

And, then, perhaps, the real miracle occurs... we practice hearing and trusting we are beloved enough that we not only trust it for ourselves, but believe it about each other too. And then, we can be the people who see others struggling to trust their belovedness, or being brought down by the refrain they are not enough; or who are feeling down and out; and we can be the ones who say, “hey, remember, you are beloved, you are worthy, you have so much to offer just by being you.”

Henri Nouwen says, “I must tell you that claiming your own blessedness always leads to a deep desire to bless others. . . . It is remarkable how easy it is to bless others, to speak good things to and about them, to call forth their beauty and truth, when you yourself are in touch with your own blessedness. The blessed one always blesses.” and, that is the way we rejoice in a weary world — we remember our own belovedness and then see and bring out the belovedness in others.

So, as we move into this new year, spend some time thinking about how you practice trusting you are beloved between Sunday's. But between Sundays, will you meditate on scriptures that talk about God's love? Will you use a breath prayer like “Holy Spirit, I am loved?” Will you turn off and tune out the messages that seek to tell you differently? Will you allow people in your life to remind you of your belovedness? Will you ask for more hugs? Will you look for ways to bring out the belovedness of others? What will you do to help that message reach the very deepest parts of you, so that all those other messages can't get a foothold in your soul?

And as we start this year, let's agree that whenever we come together as the church family we are, we will proclaim our belovedness together, we will look for it in each other, we practice trusting our belovedness together and then rejoicing in it together.