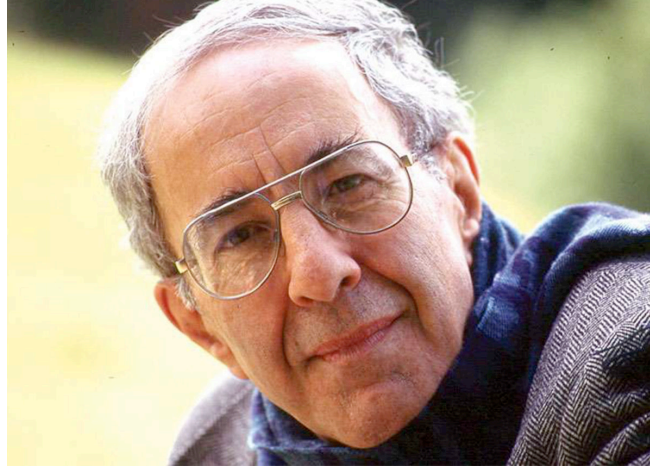


The Life of the Beloved:

an Advent Study



In a series of three sermons, Henri Nouwen's message is in essence very simple "*You and I are the Beloved Daughters and Sons of God*". Simple to say, but we need to learn how to "*become the beloved*". That means "*letting the truth of our Belovedness become enfleshed in everything we think, say or do*". Being aware of our spirituality is different from psychological awareness. Henri uses four words – taken, blessed, broken and given – to explain the movement of the Spirit within us (the same four words that Jesus used at the Last Supper with His Disciples).

If we realise that we are taken, or chosen, by God, we can get in touch with our chosenness by: firstly reminding ourselves that the world tells many lies about us, but the truth is "*that I am the chosen child of God*". Secondly looking for the people and places where our truth is spoken, and spend time with those people and in those places; and thirdly to be grateful for our chosenness.

As Beloved Children of God we are Blessed by God (and by other people). One of the ways to claim our blessing is through prayer and the "*cultivation of presence*". That is, to be more focused on the small blessings that come our way in the present moment, in the ordinariness of life. The work of prayer requires us "*to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me*".

"*All the people we know or know about are broken*". Nouwen says that it is part of who we are and our that our first response to our brokenness should be to befriend it. Our culture however teaches us to avoid pain or deny it, get rid of it and hide it from the world, presenting an image that is not the real us. However our brokenness "*like a shattered glass can shine and reflect light like diamonds*." if we only let it.

Being the Beloved

Readings:

Jeremiah 1:4-8	<i>Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.</i>
Matthew 3:13-17	<i>Jesus baptised in the Jordon</i>
Matthew 4:1-11	<i>The temptations of Jesus</i>

Questions:

"The core of our faith is the conviction that you and I and we are the beloved daughters and sons of God. One of the enormous spiritual tasks we have, is to live a life based on that knowledge."

1. You and I are "***the beloved daughters and sons of God***"; what does that mean to you?
2. What images come to your mind when you hear the term "***beloved***"?

"We are not what we do, we are not what we have, we are not what others think of us. Coming home is claiming the truth. I am the beloved child of a loving creator."

3. What criteria do you use to evaluate your value and your success in the different settings of your life: your family, your work, your church, your community?
4. Henri Nouwen says he heard a soft, gentle voice calling him "***beloved***", from parents, friends, teachers, students and even strangers.
 - Can you identify some of the voices in your life that have called you "***beloved***"?
 - What are your relationships to these people?
 - How is that message expressed?

"Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection. As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, I find myself thinking, 'Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody, I am no good, I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected, and abandoned'. Self-rejection contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the 'Beloved' and constitutes the core truth of our existence."

5. How strong in your life and spirit are the voices that tell you that you are: no good, a failure, worthless, ugly, nobody, etc.?
6. Henri Nouwen says that —these negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them, does that ring true with you and if so how do you deal with it?

Becoming the Beloved

Readings:

Luke 22:14-23

The institution of the Last Supper.

Luke 24:13-32

The road to Emmaus.

Questions:

1. Henri Nouwen makes a distinction between **being** the Beloved and **becoming** the Beloved. What do you think he means by this?

“For God there is no competition or rivalry. The Son of God shares his chosenness with us; each person is precious and unique, and each person has been given eyes to see the chosenness of others and rejoice in it.”

2. How can God chose everyone and how does that affect what we feel about our being chosen by God?
3. If you were to fully claim your chosenness, how would that affect the way you see others?

“To give someone a blessing is the most significant affirmation we can offer; Claiming your own blessedness always leads to a deep desire to bless others.”

4. What does the term blessed mean to you? How does a blessing differ from a compliment? How important is it in your life to feel and experience the blessing of God and the blessing of others?

“In our brokenness lies a measure of our uniqueness. Embracing it, taking it out of the shadow of the curse and putting it under the light of the blessing, brings it into the light of the One who calls us the Beloved and makes it shine like a diamond”

5. Loneliness, isolation, insecurity, frustration, confusion; all these are forms of brokenness. What for you is the most prominent or the most difficult brokenness you face?
6. How do you respond to suffering? Do you wallow in it? Do you try to run away from it? Do you blame yourself, others, God? What do you think it means to befriend your brokenness?

“Our gifts are the many ways we express our humanity. They are part of who we are: friendship, kindness, patience, joy, peace, forgiveness, gentleness, love, hope, trust and many others.”

7. There is a distinction between talents and gifts. We have few talents but many gifts. Do your gifts often remain buried beneath your talents?

Disciples of the Beloved

Readings:

Luke 6:12-19

Matthew 5:1-16

Communion, Community, Ministry.

The Beatitudes.

Questions:

“I am deeply aware of my own tendency to want to go from communion to ministry without forming community. My individualism and desire for personal success ever and again tempt me to do it alone and to claim the task of ministry for myself. But Jesus himself didn’t preach and heal alone. Luke, the Evangelist, tells us how he spent the night in communion with God, the morning to form community with the twelve apostles, and the afternoon to go out with them ministering to the crowds. Jesus calls us to the same sequence: from communion to community to ministry.”

1. Nouwen mentions three aspects of hearing God’s voice that Jesus modelled: Communion, Community, and Ministry and indicates that instead of turning to them in that order he tends to reverse the order. What is your experience?

“We want to be occupied. And if we are not occupied we easily become preoccupied; that is, we fill the empty spaces before we have even reached them. We fill them with our worries, saying, “But what if ...”

2. Do you find doing nothing difficult? To what extent do you try to fill your life with busyness, activity, sound and other sensory input rather than periods of stillness and quiet? Are you a worrier?

“It is very hard to allow emptiness to exist in our lives. Emptiness requires a willingness not to be in control, a willingness to let something new and unexpected happen. It requires trust, surrender, and openness to guidance. God wants to dwell in our emptiness.”

3. Is God “dwelling in our emptiness” something that you can relate to?

“The beatitudes say, ‘Blessed are the poor (and the mourning)’. They don’t say, ‘Blessed are those who care for them’. I’m learning that the blessing is located in our poor people, in people who are weak; they are the ones we should stay close to, not because they need us but because we need to receive from them the blessing.”

4. Have you ever felt blessed by people who society rejects, or who need help?

“Through the poor you will discover your own poverty, your own weakness, your own brokenness and not be afraid of it.”

5. In what ways are you poor, weak or broken? Have you come to terms with it?