

Sermon

28th April 2024

I am Beloved of God

1 John 4:7-21}

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St John was the disciple who identified himself as “the one Jesus loved.” He was closest to Jesus among the 12 who walked with him on the dusty roads of the Promised Land. So as we attend to John’s words, we get close to the person who understood Jesus best. He says in his first letter, chapter 4v8, “God is love.” Agape, the Greek word translated “love” here, means pure, intense, self-giving love and is scattered in many forms throughout John’s letter. It is the first word in our reading today, and it arrested my attention. “Dear friends,” John says. This can also be translated “beloved.” from the root word “agape”. He is talking to Christ-followers, so we can receive that word for ourselves.

Please say to your neighbour, “You are the beloved of God”.... How did that feel? Did you feel awkward? Did you feel so awkward that you said nothing? What is the awkwardness of giving or indeed receiving that affirmation? As I try to provoke a response here, your responses are the things I invite you to bring into conversation with God later on. We can too easily skim over that word quickly as we read and not uncover the ramifications of it. Is it possible to experience that beloved-ness? Let’s think about some questions together:

1. What difference would it make to our lives if we knew deeply that we are the beloved of God?

1. We would feel secure. Whatever setbacks we have experienced in our past, both our present and our future would feel solid and assured. It would change the way we operate in this world. Teachers assure us that when children are loved at home, it is easy to tell by their behaviour at school.
2. We wouldn’t be fooled by imitations. About 1/3 of the people on offer in dating websites are romance scammers. If we have a love-deficit, we can be easily fooled by them. ...I wonder if you know the best way to tell the difference between true bank notes and counterfeit ones? Experience the real thing. Bank tellers who handle legal bank notes constantly can easily pick the false ones. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve and to give. If we are familiar with the real love that Jesus modelled, we will not be fooled by the tricksters whose only aim is to be served and to take.
3. We wouldn’t feel the need to spend thousands on beauty enhancements, fancy clothes or linger over ads for muscle-enhancing protein. Being the beloved of God means we are loved, accepted and forgiven, just as we are.
4. We wouldn’t be likely to be trapped by online porn sites. Real love from a real God and his family are far more satisfying. They are true and real, not false and saccharin. God’s way of supplying our love needs are harder work sometimes, but in the end, life-giving instead of sucking our life away.

5. When we know we are God's beloved, we can give love to others from our own abundance. Recently I was in a difficult situation wherein someone was being mean. I spoke to my spiritual director about it and said, "I want to be able to give grace to that person. I want to be so full of grace that whenever I am squeezed by a difficult situation, grace automatically comes out of me."

When she suggested that I take that thought and present it to God, I did so. A sentence came into my mind: "If you want to give out grace, you have to first receive it." What a word of wisdom! "Thank you, Lord." I knew instantly that I must first be aware of my own need of grace and reach out for grace and forgiveness from God. I have to receive it before I can give it.

Grace is available to me all the time, but I have to reach out for it and I have to be humble enough to receive it, not too proud to admit my need. When I am aware of my own fallibility, I am able to give other people the slack, the grace that I have received from God. It's like that with love.

When we have our own love tank filled up, we have plenty to share. But sometimes we resist receiving it. What makes you resist receiving His words of love? For me, I sometimes feel unworthy and turn away, letting those kind words go past me, never taking them inside and holding them in my heart. Sometimes I miss them by being too familiar with them. That is why I decided to dig deep into our belovedness.

6. Deeply knowing our beloved-ness would sustain us in a "dog-eats-dog world." We'd be more resilient when the boss shouts or when the devil whispers his lies. I'd like to show you one of my favourite pictures: [\(Picture of the princess\)](#) She is saying, "Sometimes, on dark days, I think, "Nobody cares and nobody's coming." Then I remember who sends thoughts like that and I straighten my back and my crown!
7. When we let our roots go down deep into God's love, we know we can trust Him. We can relax about the hard passages in the Bible, the things that we don't understand. We can see things through the perspective of, "Well, God is love. If I can't see love in this passage, there must be another way of looking at it or there must be something I don't yet understand about it."

Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Stick with me. Close now."

Here's another question:

2. What difference would it make if my sense of being beloved was not dependent on a particular other human person?

As a single person, my beloved-ness would then not depend on my being in a relationship. I would count myself as firstly, precious to God. Secondary to that, I could wait to see if God would give me a special companion who would treat me as if I were truly precious and to be honoured.

As a married person, it would mean I didn't place a heavy burden of expectation on my spouse. It's not necessarily his job to fulfil all my needs for knowing I am loved. And also, my beloved-ness would not disappear if my spouse died. Not that I wouldn't miss him, but I would not be totally bereft and unable to be comforted.

Here's another question to ponder:

3. What does it look like if we do not deeply know our beloved-ness?

1. We are always on the back foot, lacking the confidence that beloved-ness brings.
2. We might justify our lack on the basis of cultural inheritance, for example, British reserve, or, "It's just my personality."
3. We might look at other people and situations through a particular lens which colours what we see. The lens is composed of fear and/or shame. (1 John 4 "There is no fear in love.")
4. We tend to hide, not walking in the light lest others discover what we believe makes us un-loveable. Therefore we do not have fellowship with one another. (1 John 1v7)
5. We find it hard to love others.

6. We practice ways of defending ourselves, even if no-one is attacking.
7. At each point, the enemy of our souls tries to reinforce the lies we are believing. That is why it is so important to soak ourselves in the truth of God's love both in the words of the Bible, and by looking day by day, to see how he will show us his love.

4. Deeply know. What does it mean to deeply know?

This is SO important – I cannot overemphasise it. There's a difference between mentally ticking a theoretical box and the Greek word John uses: "Ginosko." Ginosko is a kind of deep knowing. It means understanding, perceiving, realising, and experiencing. That kind of knowledge means you are able to discern truth from error. For example, you hear a bit of gossip and you respond, "Don't be ridiculous! He would never say or do that." You realise, because you know the person. It's like knowing which is the real bank note.

This kind of knowing takes time to build up. We grow in the knowledge of ourselves and of other people. We grow in the knowledge of God.

Knowing our beloved-ness is walking in the lived experience. Some people have significant breakthroughs and life-defining moments of sensing the Lord's presence and love. Other people grow into it. I'm usually of the latter variety.

This knowing is not only head-knowledge, but also contains within itself the impetus for us to act. We know, therefore we act upon it. For example, when I was pondering how to respond to Ian's proposal of marriage, I prayed about it. When God spoke, it was so clear, I knew it was God and that propelled me into picking up the phone to tell Ian I had an answer to his question. I knew God had spoken and that knowledge made me confident to act on it.

OK, love is a given. God is love. Why does St John go on and on about love in his letters? First, it is the very essence of who God is. And second, it is the reason we exist. God brought us into being, to be the recipients of his love and to enjoy him forever. Third, it is the way we were designed to live – as an expression of God's heart, love to him and love to others. But we live in a very broken world, where the purposes of God are opposed in every way that the devil can manage to do so. There are opposing forces at work and we can't expect it all to be easy.

So how do we get there from here?

- i. Examine what God says about you in the Bible. He looks upon you with eyes of love and all things are open and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. His words are true. He has already demonstrated his overwhelming love for you by sending Jesus, not just any old messenger, but sending Jesus, his very heart. Meditate on the love God declares he has for you, just as I have been doing with you today.
- ii. Put weight on his words. Consciously act as if they were true. Let your roots go down deep into his marvellous love. Read about that love in John's writings. Meditate on the words until they take root in your soul.
- iii. Ask God to show you what significant things you are believing that stop you knowing the full truth of your beloved-ness. Refuse house room to those lies! Ask God to break the power they hold over you. Repeat the truth to yourself, meditating on God's definition of who you are. "I am my beloved's and he is mine."
- iv. Bring those words into conversation with God and let Him bring the conversation to life. Look for his answers everywhere you go. He speaks in picture language.
- v. Practice loving. The body of Christ, the Church, is always available to practice on. You don't have to find them on a dating site! Every Sunday we're here and many of us would be delighted to have an invitation to dinner, or just to hang out together. "Hang about with those who know their beloved-ness. It often rubs off. (Song: "Love's not love until you give it away".)

- vi. St John says, ¹¹ *Beloved, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* ¹² *No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.* That means that there is a process of love being made complete in the context of our relationships with other Christians. (*1 John 4v12&17*)
- vii. Worship and speak to God as if it were true that you are deeply loved. John says we not only know but we rely upon the love. We live as if it were true, not as if we have to use our own resources to survive, because no-one else will help us. “Do unto others before they do unto you!” is not the best motto!

I encourage you to hang on to what has stood out to you today, and make it part of an ongoing conversation with God. Conversation is the food of love. I asked him what he wanted me to convey to you today and a few words and a song came to mind: *“Drink in my love, beloved. All who are thirsty...”*

If this is the very first time you have come face-to-face with the truth of your beloved-ness, there is a proper response. That is gratitude and returning the love. Father God knows you, loves you and accepts you as you are. Reach out in your heart to Him, who first reached out to you. He wants a deep relationship - with you!