

I want to begin today by sharing with you some thoughts from one of my favorite authors and theologians, Henri Nouwen. Henri Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic priest, professor, and writer who had a rich life of ministry. One of his most famous books, *Life of the Beloved*, is a comforting, reassuring, and powerful reminder of God's love in our world and the gift of being God's beloved people. Our Ephesians text today particularly reminded me of his gorgeous work, and I invite you to hear and ponder his words:

*"Becoming the Beloved means letting the truth of our Belovedness become enfleshed in everything we think, say, or do... As long as 'being the Beloved' is little more than a beautiful thought or a lofty idea that hangs above my life to keep me from becoming depressed, nothing really changes. What is required is to become the Beloved in the commonplaces of my daily existence and, bit by bit, to close the gap that exists between what I know myself to be and the countless specific realities of everyday life. Becoming the Beloved is pulling the truth revealed to me from above down into the ordinariness of what I am, in fact, thinking of, talking about, and doing from hour to hour... When our deepest truth is that we are the Beloved and when our greatest joy and peace come from fully claiming that truth, it follows that this has to become visible and tangible in the ways we eat and drink, talk and love, play and work."*

Friends, what are we doing if we are not living in the love of God? What false gods are we worshipping or feel forced into worshipping? If we are not seeking to embody and exist in and encourage the endless love of God in our actions and in our lives, what are we doing instead?

In the promises of baptism, there is a part of the liturgy that asks us to renounce the forces that defy God. Oftentimes we think of these forces that defy God as sin, the things that threaten to separate us from God, or the dark and demonic things that hold us captive away from the God of life and love. Some of these things we can help, and others we cannot. For example, Henri Nouwen struggled with clinical depression for most of his life. The love of God did not take away his depression, we often cannot

control when our mental or physical health takes a downturn, but Nouwen also wrote some of the most enduring and beautiful meditations on God's great love for him and all people, even amidst his struggles. God's love provided hope, something greater and outside of himself to make the burden a little lighter, the hurt sting a little less, a path for how to reconnect to life and light outside the pit of what is painful. The way we get to that hope, that love, is to take actions in our everyday living that are centered on love - love of other people, love of God, and genuine love for ourselves too, first given to us by God.

The love of God is overwhelming, it's boundless, it's all-encompassing. And in a time where there are so many things that threaten to separate us from this life-giving and life-saving love of God, so much tension and anger and frustration that rules the day, we and the world would certainly benefit from centering ourselves and our actions on our God of love. The God who created us in love. The God who from the very beginning claimed us as his own children and holds us dearly in every time and place. Even in this season of deep struggle and challenge and heightened tension, God still loves us dearly and holds us close and tells us the kingdom is for us.

*With all wisdom and insight [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.* As Paul says in today's reading from Ephesians.

This Ephesians text we heard today as a whole is a beautiful reminder of what this overflowing love of God truly is.

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.*

It's astonishing that even Paul, in the midst of his imprisonment, his own season of struggle and hardship and some of the most challenging

experiences of life, writing to the early church at this time, can find such an abundance of love and hope for what life in Christ truly is. Some scholars believe this letter was written not necessarily to only the ancient church in Ephesus, but was written to be widely distributed to churches across the area, encouraging them in their life of faith and in their knowing and worshipping Christ Jesus.

And in each of Paul's letters (or the ones written by students of Paul, which Ephesians may or may not be), any condemnation of people is about their behavior towards one another in community, in the way they treat each other. It's not about condemning one another because of the way you may or may not experience God's love or worship Christ Jesus, instead it's all rooted in the love for God and Christ Jesus that is meant to unite us in even seemingly impossible circumstances. Paul's letters are written to encourage, instruct, and even excite the ancient churches for the sake of living out the Gospel. These are small communities of people to whom Paul writes, and maybe they have big city names attached, like Rome or Corinth, but it's the people located there in community to whom he writes. It's the everyday actions they take, the tangible ways they continue to live a life rooted in Christ Jesus, that Paul appeals to. The encouragement he provides in writing the truth of Christ Jesus and God's great love is meant to be the foundation for the greater actions of everyday life, and these instructions are certainly helpful and encouraging for us today too.

The love of God in Christ Jesus is for us in every time or place, and that truly includes every single one of us - the people you disagree with, can't get enough of, have questions about, or simply just exist - all of these people are deeply held in love by the God who created us all. And it's up to us to encourage this deep and everlasting love - the love that saves us when we are barely able to show love ourselves.

Let's be encouraged by this love, dear friends, to know that there is more love than we could ever imagine available for us in this world, in heaven and on earth. God made it so in Christ Jesus, his dearly Beloved son, who died out of great love for us, to save us from the power of sin and death

and darkness and rose again in life and light and love, for our sake. The powers that defy God, the things that threaten to keep us from God, are daily drowned in the waters so promised for us in baptism and each day we rise anew in the life of Christ as the body of Christ, to live out our calling to love God and neighbors.

Instead of dwelling on the things that separate us from God, let's dwell with this overflowing cup of blessing, the love of God, taking small sips to fill our own cups and encouraging others to drink their fill too. There is more than enough love for all, there is room at the table, there is enough to nourish each of us, there is abundant love for us to inherit, and I pray, dear friends, that we may all find ways to embody and be filled by the life-saving love of God for ourselves and one another. I pray that we may all know our Belovedness as the truth of who we are, made possible by our God of great love in Christ Jesus. May it be so, according to your will, O God. Amen.