

**Why The Bible?: A Love That Will Not Let Us Go**  
**Ephesians 3:16-19**  
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If you were to take a look at this week's top ten books on Amazon in the self-help category, you would find first that there are only eight books in the top ten because three of them are different versions of the same book — *Girl Wash Your Face* — which gives you 20 rules for living your best life. Oddly, you would find *12 Rules for Life*, which I presume is shorter, and the perennial *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, another book inviting us into Japanese Minimalism, and another advocating a disembodied spirituality, and another with the 25 questions you must ask yourself. There are two more using profanity — one to invite us to not give a... and still another inviting us to, um, fix ourselves.

We seem, as ever, as a culture to be on a quest for the magic list. If I just do these eight or 12 or 20 things, then I can be successful — whatever that means — or happy, or in a good relationship. We are captive to the quest for the answers to the most basic questions — who are we; what are we here for; how do we do this?

It's in that context that we encounter these two passages from the Apostle Paul today. One, the passage Nicholas read, is considered by many to be Paul's ultimate summary of the gospel in his letter to the church in Rome. And the second, less well known, is the source of our church's motto, Growing in Faith, Rooted in Love.

I believe they are an adequate basis for the second of my attempts to answer the question, Why Scripture? Why the Bible? What does scripture have to offer, not simply as self-help but also to help us answer those anxieties the self-help books always seek to answer — Who are we? Why are we here? What are we here for? And how do we do this?

Those anxieties loomed large over Henri's life. Born in the Netherlands just as Hitler was rising to power in Germany, Henri's middle-class infancy and Catholic childhood were defined by anxiety — first the threat of and then the reality of the war. But Henri was a bright boy and, like his uncle before him, he felt drawn to the priesthood. After completing studies in seminaries in the Netherlands and being ordained as a priest, he continued his studies in the United States, concentrating on psychology. He rose through the ranks to become a religious philosophy professor, first at Notre Dame and then Yale University, and started writing books. Henri Nouwen had arrived, but he wasn't happy.

Henri was drawn to the questions that were being asked in both progressive Catholic and Protestant communities, and in the psychiatric world of the 60s and 70s — the same anxieties we've been talking about, particularly the anxieties of educated, privileged people. Henri saw that the church didn't seem to be answering these questions very helpfully, and the psychiatric world had much to offer, but it did little to calm even his own existential angst or provide any assistance for his all-too-frequent depression other than medication. Nouwen couldn't find his own peace even as he outwardly was an advocate for the integration of the scientific and the spiritual in Christian life and counseling, even as he marched with Dr. King in Selma and advocated for the empowerment of women in his writings.

Surely there was something, something the church had to offer the academy, something that could provide a framework for all of this?

And then Henri saw a reproduction of Rembrandt's Return of the Prodigal Son, one of the parables of Jesus from the 15th Chapter of Luke. The three dominant figures are the welcoming father, the good son, who has stayed with the family and worked hard, and the prodigal son, who took his inheritance early and ran away, lived a life of hedonism and waste and returned a ruined, penniless soul. The painting and this little biblical story so captured him that he made a pilgrimage to the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg to see it.

In it he found a story of unconditional love. The father's love for both the self-righteous son, who defined himself by what he did, and the prodigal, who defined himself by what he wanted. Both of those ways of seeing value failed in the story and only the parent's unconditional love seemed faithful and healing.

Still later, Nouwen began to consider one of the defining stories from the New Testament about the beginning of Jesus' public ministry — the fanciful vision stories of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness from Matthew 4 and Luke 4, what we call the Temptation of Christ. He looked to the three different ways that those stories record Jesus being tempted as a great lesson: Turn stones to bread; throw yourself from the rocks to test God's saving power, and worship the personification of earthly power, greed and exploitation — the tempter himself — and receive great power and great wealth.

The tempter gives Jesus the choice:

- Base your world on your own ability — define yourself by what you do.
- Base your world on how others will respond to you (even God) — define yourself by how you are thought of by others.
- Base your world on what you have — define yourself by your possessions and your power, particularly when compared to others.

These ways of living, Nouwen came to realize, were the lies that so much of our modern society had been built upon. And Nouwen came to understand that the defining characteristic of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures is Love. Love is the center of God's identity. Love is the reason humanity came into being. Love was what human beings were created for. Love is the summary of the law and the prophets as Jesus said. And Love was the defining justification for the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Why do we need scripture? Because it is the ultimate counter-testimony to the tempter, not some metaphysical manifestation of evil, but the banal evil, the simple lie that says you are only what you do; you are only what people think of you; you are only what you have; you are only how powerful you are. Those are the great lies countered by the one truth: You are Beloved. I am Beloved. We are Beloved.

To be beloved, according to Nouwen, is to be the recipient of unconditional love. To be loved not for what you have, not for what you do, not for how you are perceived, not for how powerful you are, but simply because you are. And that, Nouwen said, changes everything. He would continue to live with depression and struggle with how he was called to equate his vow of celibacy with his deep longing for emotional intimacy, but he would have a framework in which to work — as the Beloved.

What's so special about being beloved? The first answer is easy and one you can actually find the answer to on YouTube of all places. Go on YouTube and search for dog rescue videos. Almost every other one will feature a dear creature found in situations where a dog has been abused or abandoned. Starved for affection and loving companionship, they become fearful, sometimes even dangerous creatures. The tear inducing power of those videos is that you see what happens when a noble creature beaten down by the absence of love and affection blossoms when it is returned to them. Not all at once, and sometimes not fully, but time and again a joyful, curious, loving companion is reborn when unconditional love becomes a part of the relationship. Nice picture, pastor, but that's a dog. That's not how it works with people! Really?

About the same time that Henri Nouwen was becoming well-known, the Trappist monk and philosopher Thomas Merton's life was coming to an end. A French-born, American-raised son of a New Zealand artist, Merton's writings in the mid-20th Century invited the world into contemplative life. Many attribute the rebirth of monasticism and of Christian contemplative practices to Merton. I am one of many pastors who consider his writings to be essential to both life as a clergyperson, but also life as a Christian.

Like Nouwen, Merton found the center of his faith in considering just how loved we are by God, as testified to in scripture, and as witnessed in nature and life in general. God's unconditional love, so succinctly stated by Paul in the letter to the church in Rome, was Merton's defining understanding of the human/divine relationship — so different than other ways we can see ourselves, even other ways we can be loved. Merton writes, and please pardon his early 20th Century use of masculine generalizations:

“Corrupt forms of love wait for the neighbor to ‘become a worthy object of love’ before actually loving [them]. This is not the way of Christ. Since Christ Himself loved us when we were by no means worthy of love and still loves us with all our unworthiness, our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. ...

“What we are asked to do is to love; and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbor worthy if anything can. Indeed, that is one of the most significant things about the power of love. There is no way under the sun to make [someone] worthy of love except by loving [them]. As soon as [one] realizes himself loved—if he is not so weak that he can no longer bear to be loved—he will feel himself instantly becoming worthy of love. He will respond by drawing a mysterious spiritual value out of his own depths, a new identity called into being by the love that is addressed to him.”

Hear that last part again: We will respond to being loved by drawing a mysterious spiritual value out of our own depth, a new identity called into being by the love that is addressed to us.

We are loved, we are beloved and it changes who we are — maybe not as visually different as the changes we see in the rescued pet, but nonetheless profoundly changed.

For Nouwen, that change would alter the course of his life. After a career spent first teaching at Notre Dame and then Yale and then teaching at Harvard Divinity School, Nouwen would spend the last 10 years of his life as a member of the L'Arche Daybreak Community in the suburbs of

Toronto, Canada. The L'Arche Communities all over the world are intentional communities where, as they put it, people with and without intellectual disabilities live and work together as peers; create inclusive communities of faith and friendship; and transform society through relationships that cross social boundaries. Each person who does not have intellectual disabilities lives with someone who does, including many with profound physical disabilities that accompany their intellectual ones. Those who can, do for those who cannot, but never from a position of dominance or pity, instead as an expression of unconditional love and gratitude for having the ability to be of assistance. The members of the community with disabilities are called the "core" members of each community, because the community gathers around each of them.

Nouwen wrote powerfully in *Adam: God's Beloved* about his relationship with one of the core members of the L'Arche Daybreak Community. Adam was profoundly physically and intellectually disabled. Caring for Adam was a struggle for Henri — his needs sometimes exceeded Henri's abilities, leading to frustration for them both. But Henri was profoundly changed by the realizations of the scriptural truths Henri found in getting to know and love Adam as a friend and fellow child of God.

Nouwen writes: "Adam...was a person, who by his very life announced the marvelous mystery of our God: I am precious, beloved, whole, and born of God. Adam bore silent witness to this mystery, which has nothing to do with whether or not he could speak, walk, or express himself, whether or not he made money, had a job, was fashionable, famous, married or single. It had to do with his being. He was and is a beloved child of God. It is the same news that Jesus came to announce, and it is the news that all those who are poor keep proclaiming in and through their very weakness. Life is a gift. Each one of us is unique, known by name, and loved by the One who fashioned us."

We need scripture. We need this counter-testimony to fully understand who we are. Is it difficult to slog through sometimes? You bet. Do we need to take the time to understand context and to see those places where specific stories and statements are bound up in cultural and pre-scientific understandings of the world that we no longer see as true? Yup. But that just means we have to spend more time at it.

But none of that changes the reality that our communal engagement with this great library of God's sojourn with humanity, and with the God in Christ — who is lifted up in its pages — defines who we are, not simply as Christians but as human beings, as creatures thought up by and lovingly created

, as the Beloved created for relationship with one another and with God.

And here's the thing. When we find our way through to live as the Beloved and to see every other child of God as equally Beloved — to not live as those rejected, abused and abandoned who see only through eyes of fear and scarcity, but instead as the Beloved — we then can live in a new relationship, not just with God and one another, but we can also live in a different, non-defining relationship with the power we have and things we have, the abilities that empower us to act for the common good and the relationships that allow others to see us differently.

Why Scripture? Because more than any other collection of stories and philosophies, it shows us we are defined by and for, made by and for Love. Thanks be to God.