

Being Beloved
Song of Solomon 2:8-13
August 30, 2015
Northminster Presbyterian

(This sermon was slightly altered in the delivery so the text doesn't perfectly match the audio.)

It is the most intimate text in the lectionary. It comes from the only book in scripture that, were it translated literally, and were all of its Hebrew idioms translated into vernacular English, we would have to check IDs at the front door of the church. It appears in the lectionary a grand total of three times and twice it is this same text. For centuries, people have been saying that it is sacrilegious, that it is scandalous and shouldn't be in scripture. It is one of only two of the Books of the Bible that never mentions God even once. It dares to place words of ardor—love and passion intertwined—in the voice of a woman.

They've been saying nasty things about the Epistle of James for more than a thousand years too. Luther suggested it be dropped altogether, calling it an Epistle of Straw. The big complaint against James isn't that it is too adult, but that it is too harsh---that its emphasis on works over grace is un-Christian. James is writing to churches of people who show favoritism to the rich and powerful and do not do their duty to the poor. They are also being mean-spirited, saying negative things about one another, being hypocritical and lazy...sitting around waiting for Jesus to come back — and James is having none of it.

But even though James is writing in frustration and the writer of the song is writing in love and intimacy, did you notice, they both use the same word for the object of their contemplation? Beloved. In James...verse19...You must understand this, my beloved...In the Song of Solomon...the word almost seems to echo...my beloved...my beloved...my beloved...

I wonder if we might spend some time today in contemplating these texts reflecting on what it means to be Beloved. I suppose the first thing we should consider is does this really mean anything...Is Beloved...in the Greek "Agapeton" and DOhd in Hebrew...is this a special term, or just another old Bible word...a fancy term of endearment? ...Consider where it has been uttered before...

Isaiah speaks of God: 5:1 Let me sing for my **beloved** my love-song concerning his vineyard: Then in the Gospels... (Matthew 3:17, Mark 1, Luke 3:22) the voice from heaven speaking at Jesus' baptism..."This is my Son, the **Beloved**, with whom I am well pleased."

Beloved is the most intimate term of love in both the Old and New Testaments...and it appears in the Song of Solomon more times than anywhere else in scripture...27 times in just four pages in my Oxford Study Bible...It also appears in James almost 10 times...more times on a per verse basis than anywhere else in the New Testament.

Yes there is something about this being Beloved that is important in James and in the Song...Maybe there is something about Christian vocation in this Being Beloved... Henri Nouwen can help us out here I think....

Henri was a renowned theologian and scholar...spending time at both Harvard and Yale...he was a teacher, a writer...and despite being thought of as a fellow who had it together...he was unfulfilled....so he went on a year's sabbatical with his religious order...and then accepted an invitation to become the priest of the L'Arche community in Toronto...The L'Arche community is an intentional community of mentally and physically handicapped adults and fully abled adults who agree to come and be a part of a community of care, living with and assisting their fellow residents who function at varying degrees of dependence and independence.

For the final decade of his life, Nouwen lived and worked and became a brother to his fellow companions at the L'Arche community...He wrote two books...the Life of the Beloved and, published after his

death...Adam: God's Beloved...reflecting on how being in this community of love and care shaped his life and faith.

There, as he cared for his first charge, Adam, he learned to surrender thinking of himself as anyone other than the friend of Adam, who he help bathe and dress each day...He learned in that role to see himself, and Adam, and all of us, as the Beloved of God. He had an epiphany about what that meant one day in the chapel, preparing for communion...He looked to that table and he realized... to be beloved...is to be taken...to be blessed....to be broken...and to be given...

If you hear nothing from this sermon or from these two texts...hear this...we...you, me...each of us...We are beloved...We are taken, Not against our wills, Not with violence, but with the tenderness and affection of the lover...a lover whose care and passion for our welfare is deeper than we can know, wider than we can imagine...we are taken up by this love...chosen to be its recipients--But it's not the kind of choosing we are used to. It's not competitive, but compassionate...it's not I choose you instead of you...but I choose you out of love...The kind of choosing that instead of demandingly saying you are mine, whispers..."arise my love, my fair one and come away..." ...Away from a world that defines who you are and what your value is by....all of those things that aren't important anymore...all of those things the folks James was writing too had decided were important...things like power and wealth and social position.

And perhaps that is the blessing as we'll. In a world where it seems we have to earn everything—even love—the Song of Solomon invites us instead to listen, to open ourselves to an encounter with the source of all love, affirming our personal and individual places in the loving embrace of the eternal.

And in the same breath that we encounter our chosen-ness and blessedness in God's delight, we understand that we are also broken...It is here that Nouwen's understanding of the beloved seems the most real to us...when we stand in the light of divine love and acknowledge those parts of ourselves that still live in shadow—governed more by fear and shame, greed and resentment than the

love of the beloved. How easy it seems to become lost in these dark parts of ourselves, the instant gratification, the lost temper, the secrets we hoard like precious gold.

And perhaps we ask ourselves, how can we be the Beloved if all of this is true...how can a broken one, nevertheless be the object of God's devotion? First, we have to claim these parts of ourselves, to cast the light of truth upon them at least to ourselves and to God...and then...and here's the hard part...we have to place those parts of ourselves under the same blessings we have been talking about...the blessings of the one who came and offered to take our burdens to the cross on our behalf...

It is as if, in those moments when we feel ourselves lost in the cold winter of our broken-ness, we are invited to raise our heads and... "look, there he stands behind the walls we have constructed, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice...and our beloved speaks and says again...Arise, my love and come away...for now the winter has passed...new life, renewed life awaits..."

About now all this talk of love still leaves me asking the question of why...and our brother Henri offers a final explanation of all of this being the beloved...We are given...and in so doing he reminds us that throughout history God has never chosen a people just for their own benefit...every blessing in scripture is about being blessed to be a blessing to others...and that's what Nouwen means when he says we are given...Just as the bread from the communion table is given to us to feed us for the journey of life and faith, we are given as bread for the world. In being taken, blessed and broken, we come to know and honor the gifts we have been given and are invited to see and experience the gifts of others...Not necessarily the things we can do for each other, but the gifts that show who we can be for each other...gifts like friendship, kindness, patience, joy, passion for justice, gentleness, hope, and trust...

Imagine what the world could be like if we could truly surrender the supposed do's of modern life and live as though we are meant to be

given to one another—not martyrs and not subservient—but equal partners in a mutual exchange of the self...

I think it would look a lot like jazz...It would be a world where each of us would be free...freed by love to improvise on the themes that have shaped us... because improvisation in Jazz is not doing whatever you want to do, it's knowing the melody and the chords and engaging with them playfully and joyfully and freely...so living that way is joining our lives to those around us, to create something beautiful, something that harmonizes our notes with God's loving chords...and that something can be so much greater than the sum of its parts...and maybe even become something that invites the world to dance along. Improvising on the themes of grace and love and hospitality is our great calling today...and it can change the world...

Another 20th century theologian imagined such a transformed world...in his writings and sermons he called it the "Beloved Community." You've heard him talk about it I'm almost certain...52 years ago this week he stood on the steps of his national monument to give a speech about Abraham Lincoln but he couldn't let the day pass without sharing his vision of this Community of the Beloved...

You remember...he spoke of this Beloved Community...as a dream...that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood...That his four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

It is a dream not yet fully realized...just as we have not yet fully lived into being the Beloved of God...But can we dare wait any longer? Perhaps on this Sunday when James calls us to be "doers" of the Word...the best word we can "do"...the best hope for our time to come is simply to listen for that still small voice...listen when God calls us the Beloved...the taken, the blessed, the broken...and the given.... and to let it free us...to love passionately...and in so doing to improvise a new world into being...a world where we all find our place to play along to the chords of God's love...and maybe even dance.