

What would the world be like if we all knew what it meant to be Beloved – beloved to God, beloved to family, beloved to friends. Appreciated, respected, valued, thought highly of. What if we all celebrated a MAS together – and I'm not talking about a Catholic ritual. I'm talking about a "*mutual admiration society*." What I mean by that is not to fill each other with big, bloated, conceited heads, but in the sense of, What if everywhere we went, we knew in our deepest being that we were loved, cared for, etc.... What difference would that make? So that when we make mistakes in life or fall down, it doesn't completely do us in or humiliate us because we know that love is bigger than any mistake we can make.

We hear the story of the baptism of Jesus always in the season of Epiphany. Epiphany means manifestation or revelation, and suggests a shining light. This story is full of revelation – imagine the heavens as they open up and the voice of God speaks directly to Jesus, saying, "*You are my Beloved*." Jesus heard that voice. He heard that voice when He came out of the Jordan River. I want you to hear that voice, too. It is a very important voice that says, (in the words of Henri Nouwan), "I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me. I am your father, your mother, your brother, your sister. Wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us."

I want you to hear that voice. It is not a very loud voice because it is an intimate voice. It comes from a very deep place. It is soft and gentle. I want you to gradually hear that voice. We both have to hear that voice and to claim for ourselves that that voice speaks the truth, our truth. It tells us who we are. That is where the spiritual life starts -- by claiming the voice that calls us the beloved. I would like to talk a little about how to live the life of the beloved. There are four words that I want to use, words that come from the gospels, words that are used in the story of the multiplication of bread, words that are used at the Last Supper, words that are used at Emmaus and words that are used constantly when the community of faith comes together. Those words are: He took, He blessed, He broke, and He gave.

To be taken, to be blessed, to be broken and to be given is the summary of the life of Jesus who was taken, who was blessed by God, broken on the cross, and given to the world. It is also the summary of our life because just as Jesus, we are the beloved.

First, we are taken. Perhaps a better word would be chosen. We are chosen by God. That means we are seen by God in our preciousness, in our individuality. We are seen as precious in God's eyes. In God's mystery, being chosen doesn't mean excluding anyone. In fact, the more we know we are chosen, that we are seen in our preciousness, the more we will realize that our friends and all people are seen in their preciousness. People suffer from the feeling of being not wanted, not desired. They have lost touch with the truth that they are chosen. Often the people around them have said, "I don't want you around. I don't want you to be here. Why don't you go away?" The life of the beloved starts by trusting that we are chosen in our uniqueness, that we are unique in God's eyes, precious.

The second aspect of the quality of the life of the beloved is that we are blessed. It is so important that you and I experience that we are blessed. The word benediction means blessing. To bless someone means to say good things about them. "You are good." We need to know that good things are being said of us. We really have to trust that, otherwise we cannot bless other people. So many people don't feel blessed. I think it is very important that when we are in touch with our blessedness that we can then bless other people. People need our blessing.

Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*. The narrator of the book is an elderly minister who knows he's about to die after a long life as a pastor. He is writing to his young son, the child of a late-in-life marriage to a much younger woman, about things like watching his little boy play in the sprinkler, and a young couple walking in the rain. Water, the stuff of life. But he also tells the story of one of his childhood exploits as a preacher's kid who, with another PK, decided to baptize a litter of kittens. The boys took this all very seriously, he says, but the mother cat didn't, and she interrupted their little service and took the kittens away right in mid-baptism. When the boy asked his father the pastor "in the most offhand way imaginable what exactly would happen to a cat if one were to, say, baptize it," his father gave him a stern response that the sacraments must always be treated and regarded with the greatest respect. The narrator remembers, "*That wasn't really an answer to my question. We did respect the sacraments, but we thought the whole world of those cats. I got his meaning, though, and I did no more baptizing until I was ordained.*"

At the end of his life and after many years of baptizing the faithful of his flock, the old pastor looks back on the day he baptized the cats: "*I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time.*"

Blessing. Beloved. God is near to us, just as God was near to Jesus as he stood there in the River Jordan, with so much still ahead of him. As he moved ahead through it all, step by step, he knew that he was God's Beloved Child. Whether we can remember our baptismal day or not is less important than whether we can remember that we too are blessed and beloved. Even if we have not yet been baptized, we can rejoice that we are blessed and beloved, for baptism, as *Gilead's* narrator reminds us, is a blessing that doesn't *make* us or our lives sacred but acknowledges, *recognizes* that we are filled with grace. It doesn't matter if the sky opens up and the voice of God can be heard....for the

Spirit is truly in our midst and, in this Epiphany season, there is no doubt that we will be blessed to witness the workings of God's Spirit in many and marvelous ways, from the smallest kindnesses to great healings, from stories of reconciliation and newfound faith to visions of ministry for this church. There is so much to look forward to, in faith – something important is about to happen, indeed. *Then we are broken.* We are broken people. A lot of our brokenness has to do with relationships. I know each of us can point to a brokenness in our relationships with significant people, with our father, our mother, with our children, with our friends, or husband/wife/partner. Wherever there is love, there is also pain. Wherever there are people who really care for us, there is also the pain of sometimes not being cared for enough. That is enormous. What do we do with our brokenness? As the beloved of God we have to dare to embrace it, to befriend our own brokenness, and to really look at it. "Yes, I am hurting. Yes, I am wounded. Yes, it's painful." If we dare to embrace them, then we

can put them under the blessing.

We often want to fix ourselves, or if we feel we're practically perfect, then we want to fix other people. The main task we have is to put our brokenness and the brokenness of the people in our community under a blessing. If you live your brokenness under the curse, it can destroy your life. It is like an affirmation that you are no good and suddenly you say, "You see what has happened? I lost my job. This friend didn't speak to me. He rejected me." We can hold on to it and proof will come that we are no good. We always thought so.

The great call is to put our brokenness under the blessing, to live it as people of whom good things are being said. If we live our life as people who are taken, blessed and broken, then we can give ourselves. We are taken, blessed and broken to be given. I believe deeply that one of our greatest human desires is to give ourselves.

When we are people who are chosen by God -- blessed, broken -- we can give ourselves to others. Today, in churches around the world, people are still being baptized, still being washed in the living waters, still thirsting for God's grace and a word of forgiveness and life, still waiting to be included, to find their place in the story of healing and salvation, still longing for the chance to start their life over. The voice from heaven says, "You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." These words may come from heaven but they do not come out of the blue: they echo God's words from Isaiah long before: "*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine...you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you*". God remembers us, Isaiah says; in fact, God reassures us, "*I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands*". God's love didn't start yesterday. God's love is from of old, and it is focused on each one of us, by name. We belong to God, and God loves us. It's as if God is trying to say to each one of us, "No matter what happens and no matter how low and discouraged you feel, no matter what is happening around you and in your life, don't you *ever* let anyone tell you that you are *anything* but a *precious* and *beloved* child of God." Remember your Baptism – I don't know about you, but I can't remember my baptism. But those words conjure up a bigger historical memory. Martin Luther wrote, "A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued." I think Martin Luther wanted us to remember each day who we are, and whose we are, and how beloved we are. No matter how old we get, or how mature we become, or how spiritually deep we are, don't we still long to hear that we are *beloved*?