“Beloved”

Mark 1: 9-15
(Part II of VIII in the sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity”)

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From the Pulpit
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This past Wednesday, as I have done in years past, I stood with a small black dish in my left hand. I pressed my right thumb into the black gritty ash and I watched individuals came forward to receive a sign of the cross on your forehead or palm of your hand. It is a privilege as a pastor to stand face to face with you, and look you in the eyes and offer these words, “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” There is something raw and real about those words, something that reminds us of our mortality. Something that puts it all into perspective ---that our lives are not our own.

For many churches in the Reformed faith, reclaiming the ancient practice of receiving ashes is relatively new. I was young adult before I heard those words and felt those ashes on my head. I was moving forward in line behind other seminarians. I heard the names of three others in front of me, Elizabeth, Kate, Bob, . . . and then it was my turn. “Beloved, child of God, remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Maybe the person putting ashes on my head didn’t know my name, (I wasn’t wearing a name tag), maybe she did say my name and I don’t remember, but, what I heard was, “Beloved, child of God.” The power of those words on my heart were enough for me to claim Ash Wednesday as one of my favorite services of the year. She didn’t call me by name, she didn’t have to. What she did for
me that day was share God’s claim on my life—a powerful reminder of God’s love and care for me as a child of God.

For me there is something in offering those words to others as a powerful reminder of God’s unconditional care. Being named sets the tone for one’s journey into Lent, a season of self-examination and reflection. A season of repentance and turning our lives toward God. It’s a season of study and prayer. The journey through Lent is a hard one. It is one what leads us into darkness, into the depths, toward the cross.

Over the next several weeks, we’ll spend time together reflecting on “The Essence of Christianity.” Our theme comes to us from the works of the late Religion professor and writer Marcus Borg. We’ll discuss intrinsic components of the Christian faith. Today, early in our Lenten journey, it seems fitting that we begin with Love.

It doesn’t take long in the fast moving Gospel of Mark to hear the voice from Heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” In eleven short verses and after his baptism by John in the waters of the Jordan, God makes the claim on Jesus’ life. Just as quickly as Jesus hears these words the Spirit drove him into the wilderness
for forty days. There, Jesus will have plenty of time to think on those words. Plenty of time to wrestle with the claim on his life.

Jesus heard an affirmation from God. From beginning to end. From the farthest reaches of the world, God claims Jesus in the waters of baptism…. You can almost hear it…. “You Are Mine.” “I love you.” “I am proud of you.” Jesus heard that he was unconditionally God’s Beloved Son.

“With you, I am well pleased” are such words of love and affection from a parent to child; from one to another. Who wouldn’t want to hear those words? “You are my Beloved and with you I am well pleased.”

We don’t always hear those words. We too often don’t hear anything like that kind of love.

Instead of “I’m proud of you. You did your best.” The teenage honor student hears, “What happened. You’ll need to try harder next time.”

Instead of “I’m glad I had you for my dad. You were always there for me.” The aging parent hears, “why couldn’t you have been more like Nathan’s dad?”
Instead of “Thank you, honey, for keeping everything running smoothly at home while I traveled for work this week.” He hears, “You couldn’t have dinner ready for me when I got home?”

In so many situations, when a word of love or praise is called for, we can’t help ourselves. We critique, we problem solve, we give advice. And then there are times when we get it right.

Rowan Williams the former Archbishop of Canterbury wrote a book entitled, Writing in the Dust: After September 11th. In this short and beautiful book he reflects on the messages that people sent to their loved ones from planes and towers when they know that they were going to die. The vast majority of those individuals had just one thing to say: I love you. The voices on the phone didn’t mention strategy, didn’t express disappointment or regret, didn’t problem solve, didn’t share information. The voices just expressed love. Rowan writes of “the triumph of pointless, gratuitous love, the affirming of faithfulness even when there is nothing to be done or salvaged.” ¹ (unquote)

Love is what God expresses as Jesus comes out of that water. Love is what God shares with us in so many ways. Sometimes that love isn’t so easy to hear or it’s just hard to believe.

A pastor waited to shake parishioners’ hands after church one Sunday. He had just preached all about God’s grace and how God wants so desperately to draw us into God’s love. After the service, a young woman said on her way out, "Those were beautiful words, Pastor, but I don’t think you'd say them if you really knew me." ² The ache in those words lingers.

How many of us -- wonder the same? Could God possibly love me if God knew just how broken and dark my life can be? What do I possibly have to offer that God wants to be a part of? What if I’m not good enough? What if someone really finds out the truth about me? If God is pleased with me, than how do I become more fully the person God is calling me to be?

These are just some of the questions of the season of Lent. These sorts of questions help us reorient our lives. I think we have a head start walking into the darkness and solitude if we first acknowledge that we are “Beloved, Children of God.”

Being loved is, on one hand, having wonderful blessing and great worth bestowed. On the other hand, we don’t start it, God does. We don’t start it and we can’t make it leave. Like the water on your head, or all around you, the claim of being named “Beloved, child of God,” never leaves you.

So maybe the best starting place for all of us on this first Sunday of Lent, is in the water like Jesus. In the sacrament of Baptism, we profess the unconditional love God has for us. We claim to a little child and her family that we will teach her the stories of Jesus, that we will show her the ways of God’s never ending work for justice and mercy and peace in the world. We claim the love God has for her before she can claim that for herself. We name the child by her Christian name…but we know that the first name from God is always, “Beloved.” In our baptisms, we are joined to God in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection and God promises never to let us go.
That claim is the claim of love. It’s a claim that God loves us no matter how screwed up and complicated life seems. No matter how challenging the darkest times of our lives are. Even if we fear that God abandons us. Even if we know someone who walks away from God. Love never lets us go. It is a love that is strong enough to catch us when we fall. A love that comforts us when we weep. A love that points us to a new beginning and to new life when we think there is no way out. That wondrous love from God, never lets us go.

I’ll share with you a favorite hymn of mine that speaks about the love given to us by God in Baptism. It says this:

Child of blessing, Child of Promise,  
Baptized with the Spirit’s sign,  
With the water God has sealed you  
Unto love and grace divine.

Child of joy, our dearest treasure.  
God’s you are, from God you came.  
Back to God we humbly give you,  
Live as one who bears Christ’s name.  

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“We are reminded that Jesus came into darkness and violence precisely in order to be joined to our brokenness and then, to redeem it. Lent reminds us that whenever we find ourselves in the wilderness of disease, loneliness, joblessness, depression, or all the other things that challenge us, Jesus has been there before and meets us there in order to bear our burdens with us and for us.”

It’s been said that during Lent, God is in the laundry business; washing, cleansing and recreating our lives. If we walk close to Jesus; follow just as closely as we can and as deeply as we can, we’ll hear words that God has for us.

Don’t get me wrong, following Jesus isn’t easy. In Fact, following Jesus can be downright scary. He leads us right to Jerusalem, to betrayal, arrest, crucifixion and burial in a tomb. But then, He will be with us when He rises to new life. It means being vulnerable enough to share with another person that we know they are Beloved. It means getting out of our comfort zones and loving who God loves.

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So, listen for the voice from Heaven that calls you, “Beloved.” Share the name with others so that they may know that they are cherished in God’s sight. Ask the questions in the season of Lent that will bring you closer to who God is calling you to be. Live your life shaped by the love that first claimed you.

Hear the words again for yourself, “You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

Amen.

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