

Reflection : BELOVED January 10,2010 Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-22

Today I want you to hear those words from the prophet Isaiah – the voice of God's love – as written for you.

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, Carter, Lew, Ria, Olivia – all you who are here today; he who formed you, Ruth, Eldeena, Don, Anthony, all others in this place: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you; you are the people called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.

This is the voice of our Beloved God, calling you Beloved, too. How is it that we miss this voice speaking? There is so much in our culture, in our world, that tells us we are not enough, in and of ourselves. We can never be good enough, young enough, smart enough, successful enough, righteous enough, wise enough, powerful enough, talented enough. A consumer society is built on that premise. After all, if we had enough, if we WERE enough – we wouldn't need all those products that promise to make us happier, more attractive, more spiritual, more everything. I find it really amusing that our society has even come up with ways to make spirituality commercial: taking yoga and turning it into the latest fitness and fashion trend, using the enduring teachings of the world's religions and turning them into self-help manuals and feel-good corporate retreat weekends at fancy resorts. We fall for slick packaging every time, and yet fail to realize that it IS just packaging – that the substance of God's love is free to all. You can't buy it or sell it; you can't sign on to it for a weekend and then leave it behind. God's love is always present, never failing. It is with you whether you are Christian or pagan or atheist, baptized or not, a member of a church community or not. The force that created the universe recognizes you – it knows who you are. It knows EVERYTHING of who you are – and it – He, She – loves you. Whether you choose to love God in return, well, that's up to you – but it doesn't change anything about the fact that it is Love that created you, holds you up, and sustains your life.

That message can get lost, not just in the surrounding culture, but within religious communities as well. We often speak about the grace and mercy of God – but then we go on talking about how we have to earn it, measure up to it, be righteous enough to qualify for it. Even our gospel story from Luke carries this tension between grace and “measuring up”. Fiery John the Baptist, the prophet of Jesus' coming, is calling people to turn their lives around – and in that call is the threat of punishment if they don't. It's a tension we all live with, I think.

Most of us feel that a good life should be rewarded, and a bad life should be punished. Otherwise, where's the fairness in it all? But I wonder, if, as in modern parenting, we need to talk more about consequences, than punishment. Actions have their inevitable results. We make bad choices, well – most times bad things happen as a result of those choices. We make good choices, well, eventually, good will come of them. Sometimes the arc of time between action and consequence may feel too long for us – we're not long-sighted enough to

see the connection - but I think in most cases, that connection exists.

What the gospel of Jesus Christ tells us, though, is radically different from a simple reward and punishment system, or even an action and consequence model. The Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that not just Jesus is named Beloved – a Son of God – but that ALL of us are beloved sons and daughters of God – and like any parent, God does not want us to suffer punishment OR negative consequences. God wants us to come home from our self-imposed exile and to know ourselves loved – and to be transformed by that love.

What if you knew yourself to be loved, completely and utterly, just as you are – and that you don't have to compete with others for that love, you don't have to be better than others, you just have to be you!? What if little Carter, or Anthony, whose birth we'll celebrate next week, grows up over the years, consistently getting the message that he is loved without condition – that he is unbelievably precious in the sight of the Creator of everything? He is a diamond, a rare flower, a shining star – not in a sentimental way, but in the sense that he is as special in God's sight as any rare and beautiful part of creation? That's a powerful message – and one the church needs to share – one that we ALL, without exception, need to hear, over and over and over again, until we feel it deep in our bones.

Now I know there are many in the church who can no longer relate to a theistic God – that is, a supernatural being who exerts his or her will from outside the reality that we know from day to day. But I think there is still room in the progressive church to talk about God, if not as a person, as *personal* – that God, whatever you conceive him, her, or it, to be, is primarily about relationship. Jesus modelled that relationship in the way he talked about and related to the God he experienced as Father. I think that's what the ancients may have been getting at when they talked about God as the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is always and forever in relationship, not in austere isolation far out in the heavens or in interstellar space. That relationship is one of deep, self-giving love. As the apostle Paul says: this love, the love on which we model our own human relationships.” bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

I know that when I pray, it is personal, and that prayer sometimes comes with an image attached: one of being a child again, and climbing into the lap of someone who would hold me and comfort me and give me the strength to live my life as faithfully as possible. Every child needs to be held by an adult who loves them – and every one, child or adult, needs to be held by a God who loves them, too. The knowledge of this God is a gift we offer to Carter, and to each and every child and adult who comes through these doors – and we need to take it outside these doors too.

Hear God call you “Beloved Child”. Hear God say to you: “*you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you; you are the people called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.*” Go on, and feel that love, and then share it with others. That's really what it's all about.