

Grace, Peace, and Joy be to all of you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

See what love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.

Dear congregation!

“See!” Perhaps better translated as Look at! the first word of the passage suggests that the love given by God is something that we can see. In fact, that is what we celebrate today on Christmas Day. God’s Love became physically visible in the birth of Christ. This Love of God is not a fuzzy, feel-good sensation, but a concrete and visible reality that has already been bestowed on us. Readers of the Gospel of John would readily hear the echoes from its prologue: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God (John 1:12; see also 1 John 3:2, 10; 5:2). Here, in the first letter of John, the status as God’s children is not simply a sign of the past or a future eschatological hope, but a present reality: “For that is what we are ...” (1 John 3:1). Lest we miss that point, the author repeats it, along with another reminder of the believers’ beloved status: “Beloved, we are God’s children now! (1 John 3:1-2).

Heard it all before, right? How would you respond if I asked you this question: “Do you honestly believe that God likes you, not only loves you, because theologically God *has* to love you? What would you answer? Do we still

see this as a great miracle that God loves us so much that He came down to earth to be close to and save us? Or has the thunder of “God loves the world so much” been so muffled by the roar of religious rhetoric that we are deaf to the word that God could have tender feelings for us?

Let us pause here for a moment. It is God who has called you by name. “The God beside whose beauty the Grand Canyon is only a shadow has called you beloved. The God beside whose power the nuclear bomb is nothing has tender feelings for you.” (Manning, B. 1994:59)

This is good news indeed! For your true identity is as a beloved child of God. And this is an identity that you are given, not one that you have to acquire. I haven’t found any author that describes our true identity as a child of God as intensely and unambiguously as the American spiritual writer and speaker, Brennan Manning. I would like to share with you what he had to say about being a child of God in his wonderful book, “Abba’s Child”, to help us See! more clearly what love the Father has lavished on us.

Manning states that, “God created us for union with Himself: This is the original purpose of our lives. And God is defined as love. Living in awareness of our belovedness is the axis around which the Christian life revolves. Being the beloved is our identity, the core of our existence. It is not merely a lofty thought, an inspiring idea, or one name among many. It is the name by which God knows you and the way He relates to you. (Manning, B. 1994: 52)

If I must seek an identity outside of myself, then the accumulation of wealth, power, and honours allures me. Or I may find my centre of gravity in interpersonal relationships. When I draw life from any other source other than my belovedness, I am spiritually dead. “Who am I?” asked Thomas Merton, and he responded, “I am one loved by Christ.” This is the foundation of the true self. Our firmly controlled frenzy creates the illusion of a well-ordered existence.

We move from crisis to crisis, responding to the urgent and neglecting the essential. We still walk around. We still perform all the gestures and actions identified as human, but we resemble people carried along on the mechanical sidewalk at an airport. The fire in the belly dies. We no longer hear “the inward music” of our belovedness. (Manning, B. 1994:53)

Manning then goes on to tell the story of a man named John Eagan, who died in 1987. He was an ordinary man. An unheralded high school teacher in Milwaukee, he spent thirty years ministering to youth. He never wrote a book, appeared on television, converted the masses, or gathered a reputation for holiness. He ate, slept, drank, biked cross country, roamed through the woods, taught classes, and prayed. And he kept a journal, published shortly after his death. It is the story of an ordinary man whose soul was seduced and ravished by Jesus Christ. The introduction reads, ‘The point of John’s journal is that we ourselves are the greatest obstacle to our own nobility of soul – which is what sanctity means. We judge ourselves unworthy servants, and that judgment becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We deem ourselves too inconsiderable to be used even by a God capable of miracles with no more than mud and spit. And thus, our false humility shackles an otherwise omnipotent God.’ (Manning, B. 1994:50)

Eagan, a flawed man with salient weaknesses and character defects, learned that brokenness is proper to the human condition, that we must forgive ourselves for being unlovable, inconsistent, incompetent, irritable, and pot-bellied, and he knew that his sins could not keep him from God. They had all been redeemed by the blood of Christ. In repentance he took his shadowed self to the Cross and dared to live as a forgiven man. In Eagan’s journey one hears echoes of Thomas Merton: “God is asking me, the unworthy, to forget my unworthiness and that of my brothers and sisters, and dare to advance in the love which has redeemed and renewed all of us in God’s

likeness. And after all, to laugh at the preposterous ideas of ‘worthiness’. (Eagan, J. in Manning, B. 1994:50)

“The heart of it is this: to make the Lord and his immense love for you constitutive of your personal worth. *Define yourself radically as one beloved by God.* God’s love for you and his choice of you constitute your worth. Accept that, and let it become the most important thing in your life.” (Manning, B. 1994:51)

The basis of your personal worth is not your possessions, your talents, your esteem of others, your reputation... not applause of appreciation from parents and kids, or everyone telling you how important you are to the place.... You now stand anchored in God before whom you stand naked, this God who tells you “You are my son, my daughter, my beloved one.” (Manning, B. 1994:51)

A central theme in the personal life of Jesus Christ, is His growing intimacy with, trust in, and love of His Father. This lies at the very heart of the revelation that He is. Therefore, He was revealed, why He was born into this world – to bring us into an intimate relationship with God our Father in Heaven and to show us that this is possible.

He called God His Abba, His Daddy. And we are confronted with something new and astounding. Jesus, the beloved Son of God does not hoard this experience for Himself. He invites and calls us to share the same intimate and liberating relationship. Your dignity as Abba’s child is your most coherent sense of self. When you seek to fashion your self-image from the admiration of others and the inner voice whispers, “You’ve arrived; you’re a player in the Kingdom enterprise,” there is no truth in that self-concept. When you sink into despondency and the inner voice whispers, “You are no good, a fraud, a hypocrite,” there is no truth in that message either. “It is important to recognize these self-commentaries for the mind tricks that they are. They have nothing to do with your real dignity.” (Gerald May in Manning, B. 1994:62)

While the false self draws its identity from past achievements and the applause of others, the true self draws its identity in its belovedness. And when we realize this, we encounter God in the ordinariness of life: not in the search for spiritual highs and extraordinary experiences but in our simple presence in life. Henri Nouwen summarized it well when he stated, **“All I want to say to you is, ‘You are the Beloved’, and all I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being – ‘You are the Beloved.’”** Anchored in this reality, our true self needs neither acclaimed praise nor false humility to draw attention to or away from us. We give glory to God by simply being ourselves. (Manning, B. 1994:52)

The moment of truth has arrived, and it should sink in a few levels deeper today on Christmas Day. The revelation of God’s tender feelings for you is not mere dry knowledge. On a personal note, my thoughts and feelings fully resonate with those of Manning when he says that, “for too long and too often along my journey, I have sought shelter in cerebral (head) studies of Scripture. I have received knowledge without appreciation, facts without enthusiasm. Yet, when the scholarly investigations were over, I was struck by the insignificance of it all. It just didn’t seem to matter.” (Manning, B. 1994:59)

“But when the night is bad, and my nerves are shattered, and Infinity speaks, when God Almighty shares through His Son the depth of His feelings for me, when His love flashes into my soul and when I am overtaken by Mystery, it is (paradise) – the decisive inbreak of God in this saving moment of my personal history. No one can speak for me. Alone, I face a momentous decision. Shivering in the rags of my (40) plus years, either I escape into scepticism and intellectualism or with radical amazement I surrender in faith to the truth of my belovedness.” (Manning, B. 1994:60)

Dear congregation, we all need these quiet moments where in the stillness we can simply surrender to our belovedness. “At every moment of our existence God offers us this good news.” Sadly, many of us continue to cultivate an artificial identity, and when we do that the liberating truth of our belovedness fails to break through. “So, we become grim, fearful and legalistic. We hide our pettiness and wallow in guilt. We huff and puff to impress God, scramble for brownie points, thrash about trying to fix ourselves, and live the gospel in such a joyless fashion that it has little appeal to nominal Christians and unbelievers searching for truth.” (Manning, B. 1994:60)

Frederick Buechner once wrote, “From hound-dog disciples and sour-faced saints, spare us, oh Lord!” Jesus says, “Repent and believe in the gospel.” “Turn around and believe that the good news that we are loved is better than we ever dared to hope, and that to believe in that good news, to live out of it and toward it, to be in love with that good news, is of all glad tidings in this world the gladdest tiding of all.” (Manning, B. 1994:60)

As a church and as a congregation we also need to turn around and believe this good news. When we become too inward focused it is easy to lose confidence in our ability to move faithfully into an unknown future. We are God’s beloved children here and now, in this particular time and place. Let’s look more at how we are already manifesting God’s love in our identity as His beloved children.

We do not need to gaze wistfully for a “some-day” to come in order to possess the fullness of our identity. There is no need to wait until there are more members, or more resources, or more of whatever we might believe is necessary to be a good, or faithful, or missional church.

Like the readers of 1 John, perhaps the people gathered for worship in today's churches could benefit from an occasional reminder that God has already bestowed upon us the thing that is most important for being the people we are called to be. We are children of God. Already. Today. Now.

The chorus of voices quoted in this sermon call out to us to claim the grace given to us through the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ! Radically define yourself as one beloved by God. For this is your true self. Every other identity, in fact everything else, is an illusion.

Amen, and come, Lord Jesus!