

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

September 17, 2017
2nd Sunday in Called to Life
Mark 1:9-11; Romans 1:1-7

Called Beloved

If you were here in worship last Sunday, you know that we began a nine-month exploration into what it means to be “called” by God. Our guest speaker, Dr. David Henderson of Montana State University, gave us a starting place for this soul work, this seeking of God’s purpose for our lives.

David Henderson’s mentor is Quaker educator, thinker, and writer Parker Palmer. Palmer calls this a journey toward an undivided life, seeking wholeness as we embrace our brokenness. He uses one more phrase I especially like because its rhyme makes it easy to remember: rejoining soul and role. Before we can move outward into the world as God’s ambassadors, we need to know the one who is sending us. Says Palmer:

When we are rooted in true self, we can act in ways that are life-giving for us and all whose lives we touch. Whatever we do to care for true self is, in the long run, a gift to the world.

(2004, *A Hidden Wholeness: A Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, p. 39)

In our explorations this year, I hope you will detect a rhythm. It is a rhythm of journeying inward that leads us on a journey outward, which sends us inward again, and then back out into the world God loves. We are seeking to integrate our souls and our roles as we follow Christ. That’s what we mean by “Call,” that our souls are one with our roles.

Yet there’s another use of the word “call” which is also foundational. “Who” or “what” we are called, what we are **named** tells us who our true self is. So we read Psalm 139 and hear the truth that God knows us inside and out, there is no hiding from God, so what’s the use in trying? Far better to accept God’s love and know God’s unconditional welcome to us, from before we were born to the end of our days on earth and into everlasting life. Maren Haynes Marchesini, who grew up in this church and now lives in Helena where she makes her living as a musician, has written a simple song joining the words of this psalm with the profound affirmation of Genesis 1. You may have heard it in our church before. It goes like this:

I am fearfully, wonderfully made in the image of God.

I am fearfully, wonderfully made in the image of God.

And if we are bold enough, we can sing it to one another. Turn to someone near you, and look them in the eyes and sing.

You are fearfully, wonderfully made in the image of God.

You are fearfully, wonderfully made in the image of God.

O, my friends, do we really believe that? Do we truly know that we are what the Bible tells us we are? Do we accept that we are named God’s children, God’s precious ones, God’s Beloved?

Okay, so it might feel a bit uncomfortable to use the word “beloved.” It’s a bit old-fashioned, and it might make us think about intimate love, which we’d rather would remain private. Isn’t it ironic that in a world where sex is what sells products, where it’s hard to find entertainment that doesn’t make sex explicit, that we are a little bit embarrassed by the word “beloved?” Sex is public, love is private. Maybe we need to reverse that.

For Love is who God is. And Love is why God made us. Which makes us the Beloved of God. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, he and others gathered around him heard God's naming voice, "You are my Son, the Beloved." He and others heard it again when he was transfigured on the mountain, "This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him!" So when Jesus tells the story of a man who had two sons, one who stayed close to home and obeyed the rules and the other who strayed far from home, broke all the rules, and then limped home penniless and broken, if we are listening, we hear and see that God's love is unconditional, like the love of a forgiving father for all his children. The little book of the Bible known as 1 John is a sermon on Love. In just five chapters, the word "love" appears 26 times, and six times the author addresses his listeners as "Beloved." So we hear,

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)

And even the apostle Paul, whose intellect and ambition are so apparent in his writings that we might stereotype him as a Type A, left brain, driven leader who wouldn't be much fun at a party turns out to have a heart which has been made huge by God, a heart full of love. What does he call the people of Christ in Rome? He calls them "God's **beloved**." (Romans 1:7) And this is not a singular use; in the same letter he names individuals he knows "beloved" and when he writes to other communities of Christians, he addresses them as "Beloved" also. It seems that the name given to Christ at his baptism applies to all who seek to follow him. Beloved.

So if Paul were writing to us today, he would say,

To all God's beloved in Bozeman, who are called to be saints:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When we are rooted in true self, when we know that our ground is Love and that we are the Beloved of God, we can act in ways which give Love to the world.

What we are called gives us our identity, and our identity gives us our calling. We hear this in the introduction to Paul's letter. Unlike several of the other churches to whom he writes letters, he did not found this church. He hasn't even visited them, so he opens by sharing what is most important to know about his identity. He could have introduced himself by telling where he came from, who his family was, or what he did for a living. Instead, he calls himself "a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle." The word "servant" might more accurately be translated "slave," the lowest on the social totem pole—but this expression of personal humility is dignified by the master whom he serves, Jesus Christ. So his calling, to be an apostle, that is, one who is "sent out" by his master, merits high regard.

In the same way, he tells the people of the church that they are called to belong to Jesus Christ. We also are servants, even slaves to Christ. And oh, what a gift this is! The Heidelberg Catechism has taught centuries of believers the response to its opening question, "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" The answer? "That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ." My salvation does not depend on me, for I belong to Jesus Christ! My purpose in life is not for me to figure out all alone, for I belong to Jesus Christ! My body, my soul, my spirit, and my gifts are given for a reason, for I belong to Jesus Christ. My mistakes, my brokenness, and my sins do not dictate who I might become, for I belong to Jesus Christ!

And then he tells us we are beloved, and called to be saints. Now, Paul wrote long before the church began identifying outstanding individuals as "Saints." So if you thought your ordinariness disqualified you, think again. We are called to be saints, that is, set apart and holy. And because we

belong to Jesus Christ, that is already the case. It's not a matter of what we do with our lives, we already are saints because we belong to Jesus Christ.

What sets us apart is the knowledge that we are Beloved of God, for no other reason than God's choice, because God's nature is love, and God loves us.

We are fearfully, wonderfully made in the image of God.

We are fearfully, wonderfully made in the image of God.

Beloved, we are God's children now. Beloved, we are God's children forever. Beloved, we are all God's beloved children.

I could tell you this until I was blue in the face. I could quote great Christian spiritual writers. Julian of Norwich. Henri Nouwen. Even John Calvin. But the way we humans come to believe in love is through the experience of loving and being loved. The inward journey is nourished by the outward journey. So I'll finish with a story about illumination, related by writer Thomas Friedman in his recent book, *Thank You For Being Late*.

A rabbi once asked his students, "How do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?"

His students had several smart answers. "Rabbi, when I look out at the fields and I can distinguish between my field and the field of my neighbor, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun," said the first.

Another student offered, "When I look from the fields and can see a house, and I can tell that it is my house and not my neighbor's house, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun."

A third answered, "When I see an animal in the distance and I can tell whether it is a cow or a horse or a sheep, the night has ended and the day has begun."

And then a fourth, "When I see a flower and I can make out its colors, whether it is red or yellow or blue, the night has ended and the day has begun."

But with each answer, the rabbi looked sadder. Until finally he shouted, "No! You are all dividing! You are all separating! You are splitting the world into pieces! But--when you can look into the face of the person beside you, and you can see that person is your brother or your sister, then finally the night has ended and the day has begun!" (2016, Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, New York, pp. 356-57)

Our loving God calls each one of us "beloved." May we call one another by that name, becoming the saints we are called to be.