

August 12, 2018  
The Story Begins Here  
Rev. Danielle Jones  
Scripture: Luke 3:21-22

I'll tell you what. If you're not inspired by these students taking a week out of their summer, nothing will do it. Thank you all.

Well, you know that we are in the process of sharing stories this summer. Stories will be shared around the table at breakfast. People have been sharing slices of their stories, and I know that many of you have shared your stories with each other, and I love a good story. Who doesn't, and, of course, many good stories are found in books. Sometimes, I'm on the hunt for a good book, especially when I'm looking for inspiration or when I'm heading out on a trip or something like that. Other times, a good book finds me. About six months ago a good friend of mine e-mailed and told me about a friend of hers who worked at the University of Virginia in a place called the Bonhoeffer House with college students, sharing faith and really trying to wrestle with their faith questions together. This friend of hers had just finished her first book, and my friend told me I should buy it. I'm sure many of you get book recommendations like this, too. Most often, I ignore them, but for whatever reason, I was at the computer when I got this recommendation. I hit the one-click shopping in my Amazon cart, and the book came to me, and then about a week later I put it up on my shelf for about five months because I was trying to clear off my desk, and it was just a few weeks ago as we are saturating ourselves in stories, and as I was headed on vacation. Then, I picked it up again. It's right here. It's called *Vintage Saints and Sinners, Twenty Five Christians Who Transformed My Faith*, and this book found me at just the right time.

*Vintage Saints and Sinners* takes a look at the snapshots at the saints and sinners that have impacted all of our Christian faith whether we know it or not. It's filled with stories that shaped people like C. S. Lewis, Mother Teresa and Friar Lawrence, to name a few. It's easy, I think, to forget that saints were real people. The word "saint" conjures up the image of super-star Christians, revered for their spectacular acts and other worldly piety, but when we start to dig into their stories like this book does, we learn that every saint experienced struggles, doubt and heartache along the way, and, in fact, it's in the midst of these painful and some of these grittiest situations in these saints' stories that they meet God in a unique way that transforms their faith and lives.

So, this morning, I'm going to take a look at one of those saints who's impacted me greatly. We have nothing in common at all on paper, but I've come to realize that this saint holds a lot of truth that impacts my story. This saint is Catholic priest, professor and theologian Henri Nouwen, who I'm sure many of you have heard of. By way of beginning, listen to Lindy read two verses that impacted Henri Nouwen's understanding of God and God's call on his life. Hear now Luke Chapter 3, verses 21 and 22.

(Lindy Purdy reads Luke 3:21-22.)

Please pray with me. God, send your Spirit upon us here and now in this moment and remind us that we are your beloved. In Jesus name, Amen.

Well, I think Henri Nouwen is familiar enough that he's what I would call a celebrity saint. It's hard to be a celebrity in any corner of society, but it's particularly difficult to be a long-term celebrity in the Christian world. The headlines, even in the last few days, have shown how difficult it is to live the life of faith in the public eye, tales of pastors and theologians who have fallen off the wagon, so to speak, abound in culture. Some have stolen money. Some have fallen for affairs. Some have abused their power. Some have simply fallen out of love with God and left the ministry all together and stopped following Jesus all together. But, Henri Nouwen's life was different than that in so many ways. As a child, he survived the Nazi occupation in Holland, and after the war, he was compelled to do something meaningful with his life for God. He entered the priesthood and became an academic in the area of faith and psychology, and in time he rose in the ranks of American universities. In fact, after our 8:00 service, one of our members stopped me and said, "I actually took a class from him at Notre Dame when I was a student." Unbelievable! He went from Notre Dame on to Harvard and Yale.

Nouwen not only taught in the best universities in the country, he packed out his lecture halls to the point of standing room only, so full that people couldn't hear him or see him. So, he would promise to give the same lecture the next day when the lecture hall would again be packed. Not your ordinary professor at all. In academia and in Christianity, Henri became a star, but, of course, becoming a star isn't all it's cracked up to be. Although by day, Nouwen was writing a book a year and packing out all these lecture halls, by night he often found himself fighting off his own demons, plagued by chronic anxiety, suffering from depression in several different seasons in his life, feeling like he had to keep his homosexuality a secret and struggling with his deep-seated need to be needed. Nouwen's story wasn't all popularity and glory. In spite of his great success, he knew what it was like to wrestle with the most basic question: Who am I? And through his life's work, you can see Henri wrestling with that question, a question that each one of us asks multiple times throughout our lives as our roles change and as our lives change.

So, Nouwen decided to look at the ways that we answer that question and then look at what God had to say about the answer to that question. So, he writes, "Our first attempt to answer the question 'Who am I,' is that we say to ourselves, 'I am what others say about me.'" We all know that what others say about us is important and even powerful. We, of course, get our first glimpse of who we are through what our parents say about us. Some of us had great parents that said wonderful things. Some of us struggled with our parents who maybe didn't encourage us as much, but our parents begin to tell the story of what people say about us. The second place we learn what people are saying about us is in school. We learn from our teachers what people think about our academic brain. We learn from our friends what they think about us. Some of us navigate all of that journey well, and some of us just survive, but these experiences impact who we think we are, and then we, of course, throughout life broaden out from there through our friends, work environment, social groups and even strangers who we look to to answer that question for us.

The second way that we often try to answer that question is to say, "I am what I have." It's easy to think that I am just the sum of my home, my cabin, my boat, my husband and my kids, my relationships – that all these things add up to who I am, but what happens when one of my relationships is broken, and what happens when all of that stuff doesn't give me the satisfaction that I hoped it would? Who am I then?

The third way we try to answer this question is to say, of course, "I am what I do." In this case our activities, our work life, our achievements become who we are, and Nouwen writes that the problem with answering this question in any of these three ways is that they send us on an emotional roller coaster that is not trustworthy.

I don't know about you, but I get on that roller coaster often. When people say things about me that I like, I have a high. When someone says something negative about me, I'm sent to the depths of despair. Nouwen himself talks about having one of these packed-full lecture halls and people are asking these amazing questions and praising him for what he just shared, and just one man, raising his hand and crossing his arms, says, "I don't think I believe anything you just said." Nouwen let that one voice really almost torture him for several weeks after that lecture. I think we all have been there, and then when we collect all that stuff, we're always on the hunt for the next thing to make us happy. We have that momentary rush of satisfaction, science proves, after we get something new, but then it goes away, and the hunt begins again, and all that doing that we're so tempted to fill up our lives with can ring hollow if we exhaust ourselves, and if we're simply doing it for the praise of others.

Nouwen fought these battles hard throughout the first half of his life. Although he was a beloved professor, a celebrated author and a sought-after speaker, he struggled to claim his true identity. Throughout his life he would get caught up in that cycle of long, hectic days of doing and teaching and serving, followed by these periods of nervous exhaustion, depression and insomnia, and he felt that all of that was because he was answering that question, "Who am I?" all wrong. It was in the midst of these struggles that today's passage found Henri Nouwen and caught his eye, the story of Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist before his ministry even begins. It's after his baptism that Jesus, we're told, prays, and it's in the midst of this prayer that he hears the words, "You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased."

Before Jesus turns water into wine, before he feeds the five thousand people with a little boy's lunch, before he heals the sick or casts out a single demon, God tells him that he's beloved, and that he is pleased with him, and this is where I think we treat Jesus like a saint, too, when we say, "Of course he was beloved. Of course God was pleased with him," but that message is about as counter cultural and counter intuitive as a message can get, and I think that's why we answer it that way - this idea that God loves us just because it's hard for us to get our minds around because the world loves us for what we have and what we do and what others say, but this was the point. All that was wringing hollow. So, Nouwen was looking for a new answer.

So, in spending time with this story, he begins to think, "Okay, if Jesus is this grand example of how we're supposed to live life and how we're supposed to relate to God, and if God says to Jesus that he is beloved, we must be, too." And if God calls Jesus beloved and says "well done" before he's done anything, then none of this is about answering those three questions. All of this is just about God loving us because he says so. Into our universal struggle of success, love and security, Nouwen says, "At the core of my faith belongs the conviction that we are the beloved sons and daughters of God, and our life's work is to settle into that belovedness." Nouwen then starts to do that, and it takes him years, but as he begins to settle into his own belovedness as a child of God, his life begins to change.

At the peak of his career in academia, teaching at Harvard and Yale, he steps down from the university setting and moves into L'Arche, a community of people living with mental and physical disabilities, and as he arrives, he is asked to be a one-on-one caregiver for a man named Adam who couldn't stand up on his own, who couldn't feed himself, who had never read one of Henri's books, had never heard one of his extraordinary lectures. They began living life together in what from the outside world could look like really mundane ways, but what Nouwen describes is that, in his relationship with Adam, he begins to discover the difference between being and doing, and he truly begins to believe that everyone, even Adam, whom the world had marginalized, was beloved and had something to teach us.

Belovedness is at the heart of God's story. Over and over again, we see God reaching out to us in love, setting things right when they go wrong, calling out to us again to see him and find him and seek him, and belovedness over the course of Henri Nouwen's life becomes the center of his story as well, and you know what I am going to say next. It's meant to be at the center of ours, too. Everyone, you and me, we are beloved. The guy sitting next to you right now, he's beloved, too. The person at the stoplight that you really wanted to flip off this week – beloved by God. Yes! And the boss you can't stand, and the neighbor you avoid. Every last person is beloved by God – just because God says so. When we sum up our lives with what people say about us, or what we do, or a collection of stuff, we are minimizing the truth that we are the beloved. We were never meant to be the sum of our stuff or our achievements.

Jesus wholeheartedly believed this, but even for Jesus it wasn't without struggle. In his life and ministry, some people praised Jesus, and some people rejected him. Some people he met called him Hosanna, and some people he met crucified him, and no matter what happened, whether he was experiencing a high-high or a low-low, he tried to go back to the middle and spend time with the father where he could plug back into the truth that he was God's beloved and that that's what mattered most.

For Nouwen, becoming the beloved and sinking into that more deeply meant stepping off the hamster wheel of academia and achievement. For a saint like Mother Theresa, it meant leaving the comforts of a convent that she loved and heading out to the streets of Calcutta, and we know after her death that her journals showed that it wasn't easy, and, at times, she even felt distant from God, but she knew she was beloved, and she wanted others to know the same. Although Henri Nouwen's life was radically different from what ours will ever be, our stories have this same core truth. We are all searching for an answer to that question, "Who am I?" And it turns out the only answer that truly matters is that we are God's beloved.

So, may we reset our ways of measuring ourselves. May we enter into the no doubt hard but good work of settling into our belovedness and claiming it as children of God, and, like these saints, may we embrace even the dark places in our story because God is waiting there to transform even those places because the real truth of our stories is that you are beloved, and so am I, and that is the truest thing about our story.

Let us pray. God, remind us now in this moment how much you love us, and help us remind each other how beloved we are. May we all sink deeper into that belovedness for the sake of the world, for the sake of serving others and for the sake of growing closer to you. All in Jesus' name, Amen.

