

This message was prepared and delivered by Rev. Pamela Graf Short to the people of prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church on the twenty second of July, the ninth Sunday after Pentecost in the year of our LORD two thousand and eighteen. It is supported by the following scriptures:

Mark 1:1-15

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," "

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.

8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,

15 and saying,

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Mark 12:28-34

28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

29 Jesus answered, "The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;

30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

31 The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

There is no other commandment greater than these."

32 Then the scribe said to him,

"You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other';

33 and "to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and "to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Romans 8:14-18

14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!"

16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ— if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

Ephesians 1:4-6

4 just as God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before God in love.

5 God destined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of God's will,

6 to the praise of God's glorious grace that God freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

In our Bible story for today
knowing God is not about religion,
but about relationship;
not about pursuits of the mind,
but connections of the heart.
God calls us and claims us as children.
Beloved children.

This has a number of implications for you and for me.
Implications for how you see yourself;
for what you believe to be true about others;
for our present societal condition
and for our future together.

In one sense,
the child-parent bond is as fierce,
as essential,
as secure as the babe tucked within the womb.
Yet perhaps we have all experienced the shifting emotions;
the spiritual elevator of such a relationship.

From the child's point of view
You might respect your parent
and feel proud to introduce your mom to your friends or your dad to your teacher.
You might have a sense of security;
sure that your parents will take care of your needs
and quite likely your wants.

Or you might at another time in your life
feel frustration and shame, anxiety and fear.
Not quite sure you can trust your dad
and not fully convinced that your mom is a reliable source of understanding or wisdom or even love.

From the parent's point of view
You will likely have times of
exasperation and embarrassment;
exhaustion and disappointment
You will fret and stew and draw hard lines
and then melt with grief.
Ah, but you will celebrate milestones
and praise will spring up from your heart.
You will grow fond of your son's quirks
and delighted by your daughter's personality
and amazed by their talents
and grateful for their convictions
and the depth of your love for your child may startle even you.

For God to claim us as children sets God not only in a place of bonding,
but also a place of responsibility;
not only in place of hope,
but also a place of duty, of accountability,
and of course of vulnerability.
And so it is that God experiences the joys and pains, the sadness and the laughter of parenting.
And so it is as children we experience the honor and the confusion, the disenchantment
and the glory of having God for our parent.

Henri Nouwen says
*"Spiritual identity means we are not what we do
or what people say about us.
And we are not what we have.
We are the beloved daughters and sons of God"* (www.brainyquote.com)

Just as a teenager cannot quite grasp the love of a parent,
so too we have trouble taking hold of what it means for God to love us unconditionally.
You may sometimes refuse to accept God's constant and abiding certainty
that you are more valuable than water
and more precious than a ripe summer peach.

The steadfast devotion of God clings to you
and you cannot shake it off
any more than you can stop the spinning of the earth or start the rising of the tide.

Still, for me to name your identity as
“beloved child of God”
may be like pouring wine through a sieve.
Perhaps you have been so shot through with holes that your heart simply cannot contain the truth.
It becomes then the responsibility of the church to join with Christ Jesus to plug the holes of the sieve,
and if we cannot do that,
to lower you into the vat of wine so that you have no choice but to dwell in the richness of your identity:
Beloved Child of God.

How does a clear understanding of your identity as a beloved child of God affect your relationship with others?

There is currently a film out called *Won't you be my neighbor?*
It is a documentary on the life and ministry of Rev. Fred Rogers, who, as you may know, was a Presbyterian minister.
I highly recommend this film to all parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and teachers and neighbors and friends.

In 1951 Rogers entered the arena of television to offer children an alternative to slap stick humor and frivolous entertainment. In 1968 he began his own show. God's call on Roger's life was lived out with this simple and profound conviction:

*“Love is at the root of everything:
All learning, all relationships.
Love, or the lack of it...
We are here to love others and to love ourselves.”*

In Roger's world, being a child of God meant such things as
dignity,
honor,
respect,
carefulness,
kindness,
honesty about sharing fears and frustrations,
speaking clearly with children about illness and death. It meant setting aside days for celebration and replacing prejudice with friendship.

It seems to me Fred understood that we are our very best when we remember our true identity;
when we live as Jesus called us to live,
“unless you become as a little child, you can't enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).
Unless you live with God as a child of God,
heaven is never going to make any sense;
life here is never going to make any sense;
Unless you live as a child of God,
you live like one on the outside of the playground fence;
you live as one locked in a jar marked “pickled adult”.

A tear or two ago,
our denominational leaders asked us to take a long and serious look at our practices of racism
in our nation,
in our justice system,
in our economic system,
in our denomination,
in our own Presbytery,
in our neighborhoods and in our homes.
Racism is directly correlated with a skewed and demented understanding of what it is to be a child of God.

For you see,
as beloved as you are,
as chosen as you are,
as precious as you are,
so too are those whose skin is as richly colored as the earth
or as beautiful as the night sky.

The root of racism is the lie that God cares for me more than God cares for you;
That I am a child of God,
and you are my toy or my tool or my target.

I suppose you can make a good case that racism is a politic issue that needs a politic solution.

But first and foremost it is a deeply spiritual issue that demands intentional steps toward spiritual transformation.

Racism is a grave sin against God,
against my neighbor and against myself.

To deny that 70% of the world's population is made in the image and likeness of God is an affront to God.

To ignore the struggles of children of color while lavishing my own grandsons with books and toys and opportunities is to pile up debts I owe my neighbor.

For me to not cultivate friendships across color barriers stifles my own spiritual formation and steals away from my family richness that would otherwise benefit them and me.

On the first day of nursing school I entered a lecture hall with tiered rows.

Sitting in the top row in the middle of the room was the only African American student in our class.

I climbed the few steps and sat beside her.

Her name was Ramona Webb.

I wondered at how very courageous she must have been to attend this particular school surrounded by white faced students with only one Black faculty member.

Two years into our friendship she was frustrated with the prejudice displayed by one of my white friends.

I didn't see it.

I didn't get it.

I didn't understand why it was so very hurtful to her.

She didn't have to be friends with her. What did she care that I was friends with someone who made judgments about her and her family based solely on the color of her skin?

Okay, so I was obviously pretty dense.

I confess that.

My denseness cost me a lot.
I lost Ramona's trust; I lost her friendship.
I ran into her a few years later at JoAnn fabrics.
And who did I happen to be with on that day,
except that same white friend whose prejudice hurt Ramona.
Every once in while I look for Ramona, but even in this day of social media, I have not been able to find this beloved child of God.

Still, her heavenly parent,
our heavenly parent knows where we both have come from and where are going.
And in this life, or more likely in the next, perhaps we can study together again.
Perhaps we can sing together or pray together or weep together for a world that doesn't see it and doesn't get it and doesn't take the time to understand...

Occasionally Mr. Rogers was called upon to give a lecture to adults. Every time he did so, he offered a time of silence. During this minute he asked his audience to think about, to picture who helped them along the way; who cared about them; who "loved them into being". I invite you now to take one minute to remember the names and the faces of those who guided you, who tended to you; who took time to help you understand that you are a beloved child of God.

*Now may our Heavenly Parent
The One who calls you by name
Beloved Child of God
Shine upon your face in grace
Fill your heart with mercy
And bind your neighborhood with
Joy, understanding, kindness and peace
Now and forevermore. Amen.*