

Lent 1C: 2/14/16
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One of my favorite stops each month is at the Wallingford Senior Center for Memory Lane, a day program for folks with mild memory and cognitive loss. Parishioner Kathie McCoy works there, and Jackie Iverson and Marie Mumaugh volunteer. I do a service called "Spiritual Circle" usually involving a tactile object to help folks connect to whatever the theme might be. Around Valentine's Day our theme is usually . . . love.

One year I stopped at Walgreen's to get them all Valentine's cards which I signed with a red Sharpie, "Love, God". This year I'll pull out the red marker again but this time I'll grab a bunch of nametags and write "Beloved" on them -- as in, "Hello, my name is 'Beloved'".

Beloved.

The truth is, whatever your name, your truest identity is as *God's Beloved*, on Valentine's Day and always.

You'll notice that we have nametags out today. At last week's Vestry retreat we decided to use them throughout Lent to get to know more peoples' names. It's a good idea, for practical purposes. But we could actually do the same thing as down at the Senior Center and just write "Beloved" on every one. Because that's who we are, isn't it? That's our truest identity: Beloved. God's Beloved.

That's exactly who Jesus reveals himself to be in today's gospel, the temptation story which always opens the season of Lent. It follows Jesus' baptism. We read that about a month ago on the First Sunday after the Epiphany.

That's a dramatic story in which the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus "in bodily form like a dove," and a voice from heaven declares him God's Son, "the Beloved".

Today's gospel opens just after the baptism, with Jesus full of the Holy Spirit and led by that Spirit – where? Not to a place of lush perfection. But to the wilderness, where it's easy to get lost. And there he's tested for forty days, as Moses and the people Israel were tested in the wilderness for forty years. And, yes, as we observe the forty days of Lent.

But please notice what this time of testing is really about. Jesus is not tempted to do anything all that bad. It's not like the devil entices him to rob a bank or something. Look again at those three temptations. I mean, we need "bread" – we need to eat. Most of us seem to prefer some sort of order and authority to chaos and anarchy. And, finally, we like to keep ourselves and our families safe. What's the problem with these so-called temptations?

As much as anything, I think it's that ugly word "if" which makes everything conditional. "IF you're the Son of God" says the devil, waving that stone before Jesus. "IF you do this," the devil bargains, then I'll do that. "IF you're the Son of God," the devil taunts, "then throw yourself off the pinnacle" to prove it.

But Jesus doesn't have to prove anything to anyone. He knows exactly who *and whose* he is. He is Beloved – no ifs, ands or buts about it. He is loved without condition, which means he does not – and *cannot* – do anything to make himself any more beloved of God than he already is.

And in the public ministry launched at the end of those forty days, Jesus doesn't do a thing to try to earn God's favor. Oh, he does plenty of things, alright, throughout the action-packed gospel.

But he does so because he knows that he's Beloved.
Jesus knows that he was baptized and led by the Spirit
to share that love with those who need it most.

And so Jesus, who refuses to turn stone into bread for the devil,
feeds the hungry multitudes.

Jesus, who refuses to turn stone into bread for the devil,
dines with sinners and all manner of outcasts.

Jesus, who refuses to turn stone into bread,
gives his own body to be the bread of heaven.

Jesus, who refused the temporal political power the devil offered,
shows us the way to God's Kingdom,
by practicing radical hospitality and mercy,
justice and healing for all.

Jesus, who refused to play the devil's parlor game of
throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple,
allows himself to be lifted high upon the cross.

Jesus refused all the tests of the devil
to show us what it means to know that we are truly Beloved,
unconditionally and without measure.

This is what *we're* about this forty day season of Lent --
accepting our truest and deepest identity as God's Beloved.
If giving up chocolate or something else does this for you, fine.
Lighting a candle and sitting in silence for a few moments every morning?
Reading the devotional booklet available here or being inspired
by the saints through the fun of Lent Madness.
Coming to the Wednesday Lenten class.
Being steeped in scripture, as Jesus surely was.
Giving generously to the Church School's wishing well to support
ERD's clean water program.
Decluttering your life – physically, spiritually and psychically.

Whatever speaks to you.

Whatever helps you hear loud and clear that you are God's Beloved,
and that there's nothing you need or can do to make God love you.

You have within you right now everything you need
to share that love,
to put it into action,
wherever and whenever it's needed.

Today is Valentine's Day,
on which many tokens of romantic love are exchanged.
Very nice insofar as this applies to you.
But there is a love more profound than even
the strongest human relationship.
It is the divine love from which all human love flows.
This is God's love for God's Beloved,
and the symbol of this love is the cross.

This is the sign that's made on one's forehead during Christening
at the beginning of the Christian journey.
It is the sign made on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday to remind us
of our dependence upon God our Creator throughout this human life.
And it is to the cross that Jesus journeys
in the greatest act of sacrificial love this world has ever known.

I have an idea – let's exchange signs of *that* love today.
Let's make a sign of the cross on one another's foreheads to remind us
that we are each God's Beloved.
That's right, let's get up from our seats and
show this sign of love, calling one another "Beloved"
because that is exactly who we are . . .

[Beautiful chaos ensues]

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

