

Life of the Beloved

Questions for Discussion

Week 1: Being the Beloved

1. What images come to your mind when you hear the term “loved” or “beloved”?
2. Can you name some of the voices in your life that have called you “beloved”? (page 30)
3. How strong in your life and spirit are the other voices that tell you that you are “no good,” “a failure,” “worthless,” “ugly,” “nobody”? Henri Nouwen says that “these negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them.” (page 31)
4. Have you claimed the experience of being God’s beloved as your “core truth”? What would be involved in doing so? (page 33)
5. How has the “soft, gentle voice that calls you the “Beloved” come to you? (page 34-35)
6. “Every time you listen with great attentiveness to the voice that calls you the Beloved, you will discover within yourself a desire to hear that voice longer and more deeply. It is like discovering a well in the desert. Once you have touched wet ground, you want to dig deeper.” (p. 37) There are so many loud voices competing for our attention, our time and our energy that it is difficult to find the time and focus to “listen with great attentiveness” to any voice that is not loud and intrusive. Have you discovered any helpful ways to “listen with great attentiveness”?

Bible Connection:

Matthew 3:13-17 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

Romans 8:31-39 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us

from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Week 2: Becoming the Beloved

1. Henri Nouwen makes a distinction between "being" the Beloved and "becoming" the Beloved. What do you think he means by this?
2. "When our deepest truth is that we are the Beloved and when our greatest joy and peace come from fully claiming that truth, it follows that this has to become visible and tangible in ways we eat and drink, talk and love, play and work" (p. 47). How is this true for you, or how do you dream of it becoming true for you?
3. Are you able to describe your spiritual journey in as much detail as you are able to describe your physical journey through life thus far? What are some of the dynamics and experiences of your spiritual journey? What have been some of the turning points for you, or some of the awakening points, in your spiritual journey?

Bible Connection:

1 John 4:7-21 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. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Matthew 5:43-48 ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Week 3: Taken

1. What does it mean to you to be among God’s chosen? Are you chosen for particular privileges...or are you chosen to serve God?
2. If God chooses you, does it mean that God does not choose others? (page 54)
3. How do we get in touch with our chosenness when we are surrounded by rejections? Here are Henri Nouwen’s answers to that question. Are they adequate, or are there others you would add? (pages 58-61)
 - Keep unmasking the world around you for what it is: manipulative, controlling, power-hungry and destructive. Despite the many lies that the world tells me about who I am, I must remind myself that I am God’s beloved.
 - Keep looking for people and places where your identity as God’s beloved is confirmed.
 - Celebrate your chosenness constantly.
4. “When we persist in looking at the shadow side, we will eventually end up in the dark.” (page 61) Has this ever been true for you?
5. When you have fully claimed your chosenness, does that affect the way you see others? (page 63)

Bible Connection:

Hosea 6:1-6 ‘Come, let us return to the LORD; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.

Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth.’ What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early. Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, I have killed them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light. For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings.

John 15:12-17 ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Romans 8:12-17, 18-21 So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 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!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 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.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Romans 12:1-2 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Week 4: Blessed

1. What does the term “blessed” mean to you? Is “blessing” solely God’s work, or do we play a role in “blessing” others? How important is it in your life to feel and experience the blessing of God or the blessing of others?
2. Henri Nouwen tells the story of Janet (page 69). How would you respond to receiving such a blessing?
3. “When we are thrown up and down by the little waves on the surface of our existence, we become easy victims of our manipulative world, but, when we continue to hear the deep gentle voice that blesses us, we can walk through life with a stable sense of well-being and true belonging.” (page 73) Do you have a sense that you hear that voice, or is it missing in your life when you most need it? Is being blessed just a sentiment, or is it a truth for you?

4. Henri Nouwen says the feeling of being blessed seems not to be the feeling we generally have about ourselves. “I suspect that many people suffer from a deep sense of being cursed.” (page 74) Is that true for you or for others whom you know?
5. What are the two things we can do to claim our blessedness?
6. The real work of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me (page 75). Have you thought of or practiced prayer in this way?

The Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace;
 where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 where there is injury, pardon;
 where there is doubt, faith;
 where there is despair, hope;
 where there is darkness, light;
 and where there is sadness, joy.
 O Divine Master,
 grant that I may not so much seek
 to be consoled as to console;
 to be understood, as to understand;
 to be loved, as to love;
 for it is in giving that we receive,
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Find for yourself a ‘sacred text’ such as this prayer by St. Francis (or the Lord’s Prayer, or Psalm 23, or 1 John 4:7-8), memorize it, then repeat it to yourself, over and over, slowly, word for word. Listen for the voice of love in the sacred text.

7. Henri Nouwen says it is “not easy for us, busy people, to truly receive a blessing. It has become extremely difficult for us to stop, listen, pay attention and receive gracefully what is offered to us” (page 79). Is this true for you? If so, what steps can you take to cultivate this attentiveness?
8. “Claiming your own blessedness always leads to a deep desire to bless others. The characteristic of the blessed ones is that, wherever they go, they always speak words of blessing.” (page 82) Have you discovered this to be true of yourself or of others you have known?

Bible Connection:

Galatians 5:22-26 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ

Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Matthew 5:1-12 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Week 5: Broken

1. Loneliness, isolation, insecurity, frustration, confusion...all these are forms of brokenness. What for you is the most prominent or the most difficult brokenness you face?
2. In our brokenness lies a measure of our uniqueness. Our wounds are often an essential part of the fabric of our life. “Embracing it and bringing it into the light of the One who calls us the Beloved can make our brokenness shine like a diamond” (p. 100). Does this idea make sense to you?
3. There is a physical dimension to our brokenness. In fact, Nouwen suggests, it is exceedingly significant because we are physical beings. “Our sexuality reveals to us our enormous yearning for communion” (p. 90). Is it difficult for you to talk about or think about these kinds of needs, or your brokenness in this area? Do you think Nouwen places too much emphasis on this?
4. Healing is often so difficult because we don’t want to know the pain (page 93). In fact, the first step to healing pain is not to step away from it, but to step toward it (page 94). Is there anything in your experience that supports this?
5. “When we keep listening to the voice calling us the Beloved, it becomes possible to live our brokenness, not as a confirmation of our fear that we are worthless, but as an opportunity to purify and deepen the blessing that rests upon us” (page 98). Does Nouwen develop that idea enough to make it understandable to you?

Bible Connection:

Romans 8:26-27 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Romans 12:1-2 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

1 Peter 2:21-25 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Week 6: Given

1. Reflect on the following ideas from this chapter – what are your thoughts?

“All we live finds its final significance in its being lived for others.” (page 105)

“Our greatest fulfillment lies in giving ourselves to others.” (page 106)

“Beyond all our desires to be appreciated, rewarded and acknowledged, there lies a simple and pure desire to give.” (page 106)

“In our highly competitive and greedy world, we have lost touch with the joy of giving. We often live as if our happiness depended on having,” “ [but] true joy, happiness and inner peace come from giving ourselves to others.” “A happy life is a life for others.” (page 109)

“Just as bread needs to be broken in order to be given, so, too, do our lives.” (page)

2. There is a distinction between talents and gifts. We have few talents but many gifts. “Our gifts are the many ways we express our humanity. They are part of who we are: friendship, kindness, patience, joy, peace, forgiveness, gentleness, love, hope, trust and many others. These are the true gifts we have to offer to each other.” (page 114) Do your gifts often remain buried beneath your talents?
3. Is it true that we are often prevented from preparing ourselves well for death? (page 115) Are you well prepared to die?

4. Henri Nouwen calls death “a final act of giving” (page 116). What does he mean by that? Does the idea that “the death of the Beloved bears fruit in many lives,” help in understanding this? (page 120)

Bible Connection:

John 12:24-26 Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

John 15:13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

Galatians 5:22-23 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

Week 7: Living as the Beloved

1. The world is only evil when you become its slave. The world has a lot to offer—just as Egypt did for the children of Jacob—as long as you don’t feel bound to obey it. All the good things our world has to offer are ours to enjoy. But we can enjoy them truly only when we can acknowledge them as affirmations of the truth that we are the Beloved of God (page 131). Have you discovered any strategies which help you avoid being overly materialistic? Do you think material things and the longing for them interferes with our ability to relate to God and to comprehend our belovedness?
2. “The unfathomable mystery of God is that God is a Lover who wants to be loved. Everything in life becomes an expression of the divine ‘Do you love me?’” (page 133). Can it really be that simple?
3. “Eternal life is not some great surprise that comes unannounced at the end of our existence in time; it is, rather the full revelation of what we have been and have lived all along.” (page 138) So often we think of “heaven” or “afterlife” as an existence that is thoroughly different from the life we live on earth. Nouwen seems to think of it more as a continuation of life rather than a radical change in it. What do you think?

Bible Connection:

John 14:1-7 ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.’ Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not

know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

Romans 12:9-21 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.