

# *You Are My Beloved*

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On Mark 1:9-11

**Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**June 27, 2010**

*Introduction to the Scripture:* In this next, very short, reading, a voice from heaven quotes Psalm 2. Knowing that, we see that the voice says, “You are the one from whom I am inseparable; you are the one who is ultimately victorious: my son, my child—the child of God.” And in Mark this message from the heavens, “You are my beloved Son,” is given to Jesus just before he is sent into the wilderness. The voice from heaven is the Parent’s word to the Child before he enters the fray of his calling. Note that the words are spoken to the Son, not to the crowd—they are words for him to carry on his journey. Listen again for the word of God.

*In those days Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved. In you I am well pleased.”*

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Can everybody hear me? If you’re having difficulty, we have a T-loop system in here. You can turn a switch on your hearing aid, and it will pick up the sound system feed. And we have other hearing assist devices. And we can get Steve (who is operating the sound system) to turn things up if you need. It’s important that we can all hear. It’s important.

I wish when we were other places, we all had some kind of T-loop device to turn up Sunday morning. Some of you out there in radio land listen to podcasts of Sunday morning. I suppose that’s one way you can crank up the volume, but it would be good if we could crank up the volume on Sunday morning all the rest of the week, wherever we went.

It would be good, because there is so much background noise. I don’t mean the sirens from the fire station. I don’t mean the occasional child. That’s not really background noise; that’s noise that comes right into the foreground and then goes away.

The background noise I’m talking about is more subtle and more ubiquitous. If you’ve had the power go out in your neighborhood recently, you know that background noise. It’s so much quieter when the power is out. Noise disappears that you didn’t even notice was there, until it was gone.

*Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.*

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But the background noise that drowns out Sunday morning is not so much out there; it's in here. It's in our heads. It's the background noise we carry around all the time. And it's much harder to turn that noise off.

Do you know the movie, "Spinal Tap?" It's a kind of crude and very funny mock documentary about a made-up British rock band called, Spinal Tap. They are known for being REALLY loud and stereotypical rockers and not terribly bright—and highly successful by fulfilling a British rock cliché. In one scene, Rob Reiner, the mock documentarian, interviews the lead guitarist, asking him how they get their "sound." The guitarist shows him his amplifier and says, "Look here. Most amps have dials that go up to 10, right? I mean, you turn them all the way up and they go up to 10. See these here? They go up to 11. That's one more than 10. We go one louder than 10." Reiner asks, "Why don't you just make the amps louder when they're at 10?" The guitarist simply can't understand the question and stares blankly and points to his amp and says, "This one goes up to 11."

Well, we want this one, we want Sunday morning, to go up to 11, so we can always hear it—over all the background noise.

It's vital that we can hear Sunday morning, because the background noise in our heads is not just loud; it's destructive. This is the noise I mean. The great spirit and writer Henri Nouwen:

"As I look within as well as around myself, I am overwhelmed by the voices telling me, 'You are nothing special; you are just another person among millions; your life is just one more mouth to feed; your needs just one more problem to solve.' These voices are increasingly powerful, especially in a time marked by so many broken relationships. Many children never feel really welcomed in the world. Beneath their nervous smiles, there is often the question: 'Am I really wanted?' When we do not feel loved by those who gave us life, we often suffer our whole life long from a low self-esteem that can easily lead to depression, despair, and even suicide..."<sup>1</sup>

That's the background noise I'm talking about. It is a sometimes a din. It's so loud and so persistent, even when we aren't fully aware of it or what it's saying.

In the novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, Lily Owens who is 14 knows this childhood rejection, and like Nouwen, she is able to isolate the voice of the din and what it is saying. She says: "Probably one or two moments in your whole life you will hear a whispering spirit, a voice [seemingly] coming from the center of things. It will have blades for lips and it will not stop until it speaks the one secret thing at the heart of it all. Kneeling on the floor, unable to stop shuddering, I heard it

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), pp. 57-58.

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plainly. It said, 'You are unlovable, Lily Owens. Unlovable. Who could love you? Who in this world could ever love you?'"<sup>2</sup>

That's why in our tradition Satan is often The Accuser. We aren't always clear what the background noise is saying; we can't often isolate its message, but that's its essence: the accusation that "You are worthless." And it has its effect. We accommodate to it. It diverts us. Those of you who have suffered from depression know it well—the voice brings a kind of terror with it.

It's a terror "like gravity: [we] accommodate [our] movement to its pull, even though [we] are hardly aware of it." ... "Terror can freeze portions of life so that creativity, beauty, adventure, intensity, intimacy, novelty and curiosity are numbed and shut down." These accusations "deflate a healthy sense of self-worth and agency ... Those afflicted [often]... embody a prolonged apology—[an apology] for having suffered harm, for provoking it, deserving it, [an apology] for all the imagined failures, [an apology even] for existence itself ["I'm sorry I'm here; I'm sorry I'm in your life." ]—[That's The Accuser's voice] and it diminishes the self on a sliding scale from self-loathing to shyness. It happens so that [of the potentially most beautiful things,] we deride ourselves, asking, 'Who are you to try such a thing?'"<sup>3</sup>

If a straight, white male, from a relatively stable middle class family, like me, can be pulled into that gravity well, imagine how loud the din of those voices might be for others who have not been handed such privileges and insularities.

It's possible that you do not have this experience. Some have been so loved, so well and for so long that The Accuser is not hard to name or tame, to muzzle or ignore, but my experience is that is a rare gift. It often takes a lifetime of spiritual practice to tame and quiet those accusing voices in our heads.

This self-accusation has a particular virulence against young people. So often younger people (teenagers and younger) take on every broken experience and make it their fault. Somebody's angry—they must have done something. Parents are quarrelling—must be their fault. Divorce comes—who else? Somebody in the family dies, and they think they should've kept it from happening.

Unless or until you've had some experience with sorting out relative causes and effects and have found the habit to rest in the mercy and love of God, it can be brutal.

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<sup>2</sup> Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees* (New York: Viking Penguin Books, 2002), p. 242.

<sup>3</sup> This paragraph is a paraphrase of the extraordinary work of Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), pp. 58-60.

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And on top of the accusing filter of experience, the society's voices that come in through our ears and echo around in our heads persist in saying, "You're not thin enough. You're wearing totally the wrong thing. Your teeth aren't even so good. You don't have the newest whatever. You're so five minutes ago." It's constant. These lies are constant. And we and they especially accommodate to the voices, to the lies.

In silent meditation we are taught to quiet our minds and silence all the voices in our head—it's like turning off the whole power grid. When you do, or when you try to, you discover that there's this perpetual running dialogue in your head, and they call it the "monkey mind," the constant chatter—here, there, everywhere, and... it's not just chattering, it's often running us down. For most young people that monkey is an 800 pound gorilla, telling them that are worthless, unlovable and beating them up.

But it can pummel anyone. Karen and I have a friend, Mary. She and her husband lived with us for some months before they found their way to serving a church in another state. After a few short years their marriage ended, and Mary and her son came back to live with us for a while. What I remember most vividly (and it is something I have witnessed again and again), Mary, who Karen and I both know to be so talented, so attractive, so gifted in so many different ways... As her divorce began to invade her inner dialogue, Mary thought (Mary was convinced in way we could barely affect) that she was completely unattractive, ugly and unlovable and of no value—she was blinded by that voice; she could not see who she was; it took everything she could just to keep from giving up—it was as if she were channeling Lily Owens—it was shocking that this talented, gracious, beautiful woman was decimated by [just] an inner voice. She was just laid waste by a lie.

BUT... There is another voice.

And it is the one voice that is telling the truth. When Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan, *just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart ..., and a voice, the true voice, came from heaven, "You are my Beloved Son..."* It is God's word to each of us.

You are a child of God. Mark makes it quite clear that Jesus' identity as God's child, revealed at his baptism, is the identity that we share with him in our baptism.

I was counseling a man named Dale during his divorce. He was devastated; he was completely at sea, no inkling of confidence; his sense of self vanished. Somehow in the course of our first session together, something shook loose, pierced the condemnation in his mind, as if the heavens were torn apart above him, and he pulled out a pen from his pocket, and through his shaking tears, he scrawled on his hand, "I am more than this. I am more than this."

Yes, you are. You are a child of God.

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Mark is clear that the voice from heaven is the same for all of us. It is the voice that sustains Jesus in the wilderness and sustains us. We all go from baptism to wilderness, but we go with the true voice of the Parent. It is the voice that empowers us to deflect the lies, to turn aside The Accuser. It is how God blesses us on this journey, with the voice that says, "You are my beloved Child." That's why we pray, "Lord, baptize Julia and all of us with your Holy Spirit." It's the volume on that that we want to turn up.

I wonder if you know this next story. It's about how precious hearing that voice is, because that voice is not turned up to 11 very often.

The story begins with a young man, who was tragically killed in Vietnam. Among his effects they found a piece of binder paper that looked like it had been unfolded and refolded countless times. It had his name at the top. And it said things like: "I really like the way you make me laugh." "You're really good at baseball." "You have a great smile." "I'm glad I know you." At his wake, some of his High School friends were there, and his mother asked them if they knew anything about this piece of paper on her son.

One of the girls said, "Oh yeah, I know what that is," and pulled she a very similarly folded piece of paper from her purse. And another said, "Mine's right here in my wallet. I always pull it out on the hard days." And another said, "Mine's in my top dresser drawer at home."

Evidently, they were all part of an English class. And one day when they were just out of control and picking at each other, the teacher made them all sit down and do this assignment. They had to write their name at the top of a piece a paper and hand it to the person next to them. And that person had to write something positive about the person whose name was on the paper. And then they passed it on and passed it on until everyone had written a kind of affirmation of everyone else in the class. And those kids held on to those notes for years.

We actually give a piece of paper to the family of those baptized—a baptismal certificate. It doesn't usually get folded and refolded again and again, but what it says in essence is what the voice from heaven says: "You are beloved." It is a precious truth that I want to turn up to 11 in all your interior dialogue. The word is precious.

This is what Henri Nouwen says and I wish it as a constant voice in our T-Loop:

"...Look at our daily struggles with our relationships, with our work, our health ... Where, where is the blessing? The feeling of being accursed comes easily. We easily hear an inner voice calling us evil, bad, rotten, worthless, useless, doomed to sickness and death. Isn't it easier for us to believe that we are cursed than we are blessed? Still, I say to you, as the Beloved Daughter of God, you are blessed. Good words are being spoken to you and about you—words that tell the truth.

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The curses—noisy, boisterous, loud-mouthed as they may be—do not tell the truth. They are lies; lies easy to believe, but lies nevertheless.”<sup>4</sup>

That’s why they call Satan the Father of Lies, too, but when you can identify that Accuser’s voice, and you know who it is who is lying, his power fades. After Jesus was baptized, after he heard the true voice say, “you are beloved,” immediately he was out in the wilderness, where he was tested by Satan..., where the din of Satan’s lies tested him.

That’s what happens when we are baptized. We hear that voice of truth, we hear it here on Sunday morning, we hear the voice of God, saying, “You are my Beloved,” and then we go out into the wilderness, a wilderness that is not a quiet place. It is a place echoing lies—we need to turn up the volume on the true voice.

What was said to Julia is said to all of us. I want you to flip the little T-Loop switch on your ears to hear it. Or keep that note nearby in your pocket. Remember that word scrawled on your hand. But do not forget.

The Accuser is wrong; he is a liar. You do not have to have what they say you really need to have. You do not have to be what they say you should be in order to be loved by God. That is done deal. You are already God’s beloved children.

Can you hear me? Can you hear me?

We don’t have T-loop switches on our ears, and we can’t turn it up to 11, and you might not have those words scrawled on your hand, but...there is a new catechism. I think we can learn it. This is the first question: Who are you? The answer is: *I am a child of God.*

So, let’s try it. Who are you? *I am a child of God.*

Who are you? *I am a child of God.*

OK. Now, I would like you to respond, ‘I, (your name), am a child of God.’” It is a word spoken to you, to you, as a child of God.

Who are you? *I, (\_\_\_\_\_), am a child of God.*

Again, Who are you? *I, (\_\_\_\_\_), am a child of God.*

Believe it. Remember it. You are a child of God.

Let all of God’s beloved children say, “Amen.”

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<sup>4</sup> Nouwen, *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.