**January 12, 2020**

**Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17**

Last week we talked about God’s *logos* – Christ as the Word – and the current trend to choose a *word* or phrase to guide ourselves in the new year. James Clear wrote in Atomic Habits that "Behavior that is incongruent with the self will not last… The more pride you have in a particular aspect of your identity, the more motivated you will be to maintain habits associated with it." So for everyone making new year’s resolutions, if we aim to do or be something too different from who we really are (or willing to put the heavy work into *becoming*), it’s unlikely that we will be successful. Until, as James Clear wrote, the behavior is congruent – in line – with who we are, we won’t be motivated to follow through. Taking this a step further, for people of faith, going to church will just be empty actions (and likely short-lived) until someone internalizes the teachings so that our life is aligned with what is read in scripture and proclaimed in worship. We have to be motivated for habit and doctrine to become faith. When we *are* motivated, when we do have an active faith, prayer and reading scripture are things we do every day – at church and home, by ourselves and with others. Our faith naturally comes into our conversation with others – because it is as much a part of who we are as our family or our job or any of the other things that organically come up as we are talking with others.

Former President Jimmy Carter is a wonderful example of how this works. Even at age 95, he can be found building houses with Habitat for Humanity, helping neighbors in need of disaster relief, and teaching Sunday School almost every week. He’s a force to be reckoned with. It’s as if being a Christian is his real *job*. He said, “I have one life and one chance to make it count for something… my faith demands that I do whatever I can wherever I can, for as long as I can with whatever I have to try to make a difference.” President Carter’s behavior is congruent –aligned – with who he really is, a child of God; and because his faith is not just a box to check each Sunday, or a way to get votes, Carter puts his faith to work. Everyday. Everywhere. He knows the privilege and the responsibility of being a child of God. He knows that he has a job to do.

In *his* baptism, in our baptisms, we are named “child of God.” Just as God claimed Christ and called him, “Beloved,” so are we named and claimed. Then with the water still dripping down our necks, we are meant to get to work. As God said to Isaiah, “Here is my chosen, I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring justice to the nations... I have given you to the people to open the eyes that are blind and bring out the prisoners from the dungeon.” Three times in the space of 4 verses God declared that this chosen one’s job was to bring justice. (Another echo of our favorite memory verse – Micah 6:8 – what does the Lord require of us? to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.) God loves this servant for who they are, then gives them big responsibilities – essentially chores for the well-being of the family. Just as you ask your kids to help with laundry or leaves or other things to help your family be the best you can be, so God asks us to share in the work – share in the belovedness – of God’s family. Yes, you are beloved, now go show others that they are, too. Treat others as the beloved. Open blind eyes, feed hungry bellies, free those imprisoned, do justice.

Interestingly, in this particular passage, the servant is meant to do so without crying or lifting up his voice, without even making it heard on the streets. The servant is meant to do justice without breaking bruised reeds or quenching dim wicks. I wonder, “how is this possible?!” Justice-bringers are cage-rattling people. They challenge and turn upside down and call out. Justice-bringers make a name for themselves by being the outspoken advocates – like Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Jr and today’s William Barber. And there are plenty of scriptural examples that call for just such a loud voice. But not here. This servant is meant to be a gentle presence amongst the people. This is President Carter building houses at the age of 95 without a press corps. He’s doing it because it’s his Christian privilege and duty to show others that they are beloved, too. This is Mahatma Gandhi who wore the traditional clothing of Indian poor, who lived as his neighbors, and practiced nonviolent resistance to show *others* that they are beloved, that all are beloved.

There is a need for us to model beloved-ness because people don’t actually think of themselves this way. Some nod and say, “oh sure, I know I’m special. I know I’m loved.” but not many actually feel *in their bones* that they are truly beloved. Beloved by God and by other people: neighbors and strangers. We could truly change the world if we believed that we were beloved. Disney produced a tv show this year called “Encore” which reunited high school musical casts for a re-production 20, 30, even 40 years after they were originally done. One episode featured a high school from Houston, TX who performed *Godspell* in the ‘90s, and was called back together for an encore presentation last summer. One of the themes which has run through each episode – regardless of where the high school was or how long it had been since graduation – was that most former students felt awkward and out of place in high school, while their classmates all thought that they had been confident and gifted. No one could believe that *that* person didn’t know how special they were. And yet, they hadn’t taken the time to tell each other that they were beloved back then. That’s just not something we normally do, even with our closest friends and family. And apparently, even though classmates thought of one another as special and gifted and friends (and maybe beloved), their actions didn’t suggest anything more than the usual peer relationship. Only now, looking back, could they say how significant each other were and are.

Of course, believing that *we are* the Beloved is difficult enough, but treating others as if *they* are beloved is the gentle, justice-bringing work that truly opens blind eyes and prison doors. When we treat others as the beloved, we show them what they might not have seen themselves. We show them that they have worth. They are valued. They, too, are part of our family. We give them a window into what we believe and *in whom* we believe. That faith is not meant to stay on the page, but is meant to come alive in our everyday words and actions. Recognizing the beloved-ness of all God’s children and conveying that with our words and actions is a Herculean task – bigger than the best of us. Mother Teresa said, “I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that he will guide me to do whatever I’m supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I’m praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us and we change things.” She showed the *least of these* their belovedness in her words and deeds. And she was able to do so because she was aligned with Christ’s teachings. She was aligned with Isaiah’s servant song. She worked to open blind eyes, she worked to feed the hungry, she worked to open literal and metaphorical prison doors.

You may not be a Mother Theresa, but you are – we all are – called “Beloved” in these baptismal waters. We can do justice. We can open blind eyes and prison doors and feed hungry bellies if we believe and show that we are beloved, and others are, too. Let that be our charge this week.