

BELOVED OF GOD

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

John 21:20-24
1 John 3:1-2a, 16-23

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Even in close families, it's not unusual to experience competition, hurt feelings, and jealousy. Sometimes children compete for their parents' time, attention and affection. And if it is ever perceived by one child that a parent treats another child differently or what they determine to be better, then the conclusion is often that the parent loves one child more than the other.

"You love Ethan more than me!" That's an emphatic statement I heard from my daughter Emily probably hundreds of times during her childhood years. And yet the fact is, most everyone, but Emily, could see that she regularly got more of my attention, time, energy and money because she was "high maintenance" and typically demanded so much more than Ethan. Ethan was always more laid back than his sister. He never demanded as much and was mostly appreciative of the things I did for him and bought for him over the years. For Emily, her focus was not on the many times I dropped everything to attend to her perceived needs, but instead on those times when I didn't drop everything. Her focus was not so much on the many things I bought for her, but on that which I would not buy for her.

As parents, whether you treat your children differently because situations and temperaments call for it or whether you treat them the same, it's not unusual for it to be perceived as unfair at times. As parents, we love all our children, and it's silly and frustrating when our children insist otherwise. And yet, even we adults sometimes find ourselves jealous, full of worry, and even angry if we perceive that someone we love is giving someone else too much time and attention. Over the years, daytime and evening "soap opera" shows have thrived on feelings of jealousy and the competitive actions that often follow. These days, the ratings of many reality shows also appear to be dependent on feelings of jealousy, and acts of competition and revenge. And certainly, crimes of passion are driven by these same emotions.

Maybe it's because of these feelings that are all too prevalent that I have always been struck by the way the apostle John refers to himself in the Gospel he is credited with writing. Throughout the Gospel of John, he refers to himself as "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*" (John 13:23, 19:26, 21:20). My initial reaction to this personal description of himself was that John was being rather presumptuous. It almost seems as though he is saying, "Look at me, I'm special because Jesus loved me so much more than you." Certainly, Jesus loved John, I'll give him that. But didn't he love all his other disciples as well?

But just because John emphasized Jesus' love for him, does that mean that Jesus loved the other disciples less? As parents, as Christians, we know the answer to that question is "no." Of course, Jesus didn't love John more than all his other disciples. If we can just get past those initial feelings of competition

and jealousy, we might begin to receive and know the wonderful experience that John is sharing with us.

It seems to me that John was fully in touch with the Lord's sacrificial and enduring love for him. He really got it! From the very depth of his heart, mind, and soul John knew that he was dearly loved. It was likely his personal, intimate experience of love that sustained him later in his life when he was imprisoned on the island of Patmos. No matter how bad things got, and even when separated from family and friends, John's conviction of God's love for him was not shaken. It was because the profound and intimate experience of divine love satisfied John's deepest longings that such love was naturally reflected in his life and writings.

When John wrote his first epistle, it's apparent he was trying to make an important point about this profound experience of God's love. He wanted his readers to know that what was true for him was equally true for them. John wrote what he did not because he felt God loved him more, but because he knew the powerful, life-transforming, life-sustaining love that had made all the difference in his life could make all the difference in each one of our lives as well.

John wants every follower of Jesus to know from the depths of our own hearts, minds and souls that we, too, are a dearly loved child of God. In fact, John chose to use the word "beloved" throughout his first epistle letter to emphasize this point. He says, "*Beloved, I am writing you... Beloved, we are God's children... Beloved... we have boldness before God... Beloved, do not believe every spirit... Beloved, let us love one another... Beloved, since God loved us so much...*" (1 John 2:7, 3:2, 21, 4:1,7,11). John was making an important point by using "beloved" so many times. After all, if you call someone "beloved" enough maybe they will begin to believe it.

So, do you believe it? Do you know from the depth of your heart, mind and soul that you are beloved of God? Do you know that it was for you that Jesus died? You personally are the object of his greatest affection. Your Heavenly Father delights in you and longs to hold you ever closer to His heart. In fact, God wants you to rest in and experience fully His lavish love, a love that is constant and eternal, never fading or passing away; a love that contains everything you need to satisfy the deep cravings of your soul.

This love is unconditional. God does not give it because you act the right way nor does God take it away when you do something bad. His love is neither manipulative nor controlling, although it has the power to change you. Your Heavenly Father does not lavish gifts on you so that you will in turn do Him a favor. God loves you simply because it is God's nature to be loving. You are God's child, heir to the Kingdom and graciously provided with every good thing from his hand. God longs for you to fully turn to him, to know his love and to trust that through it you can know true joy and hope.

God's love brings freedom, confidence and strength to individuals whose lives are too often defined by estrangement. It is powerful enough to chase away feelings of loneliness, fear and self-loathing, and to leave behind a deep and lasting peace. Because this love, God's love, is perfect love, it is the very source of all you need to make your life full and complete.

We all know something about imperfect love and its conditional, inconsistent, and controlling nature. What imperfect love does is create fear and heartache, pain and jealous competition. When we feel alone and afraid, what happens too often is that we grab onto a love that ends up leaving us even more insecure and empty. We grab onto something that may initially look good, but we eventually discover that it is nothing more than a cheap imitation of love.

A number of years ago, I ran across a story about a five-year old, cheerful little girl named Jenny. One day while she was waiting in line with her mother at a checkout counter when something caught her eye. It was a pink box with a necklace of pearls inside. "O please, Mommy. Can I have them? Please, Mommy, please!" Quickly the mother checked the back of the little box and then looked back into the pleading blue eyes of her little girl's upturned face. "Four ninety-nine – that's almost \$5. If you really want them, I'll think of some extra chores for you and in no time you can save enough money to buy them for yourself."

She was almost hoping that Jenny would forget about those cheap pearls. But as soon as Jenny got home, she emptied her little change bank and counted out almost \$2. After dinner, she did more than her share of chores. Her birthday was about a week later, and Jenny received some money from her Grandparents. When adding part of that to what she already had, she had more than enough to buy the necklace which she had not forgotten about. Jenny loved her pearls. They made her feel dressed up and grown up. She wore them everywhere – Sunday school, kindergarten, even to bed. The only time Jenny took them off was when she went swimming or had a bath, and that's because her mom was concerned about them breaking or turning her neck green.

Jenny also had a very loving daddy and every night when she was ready for bed, he would stop whatever he was doing and go upstairs to read her a story. One night when he finished the story, he asked Jenny, "Do you love me?"

"Oh, yes Daddy. I love you."

"Then give me your pearls."

"Oh, Daddy, not my pearls. But you can have Princess – my white horse, the one with the pink tail... She's my favorite."

"That's okay, honey. Daddy loves you." And he kissed her good night.

About a week later, after story time, Jenny's daddy asked again, "Do you love me?"

"Yes, daddy, I love you."

"Then give me your pearls."

"Oh, daddy, not my pearls. But you can have my baby doll. The new one I got for my birthday."

"That's okay. Sleep well. Daddy loves you." And he kissed her good night as always.

A few nights later when her daddy came in, Jenny was sitting on her bed with her legs crossed. As he came close, he noticed her chin was trembling and a little tear was rolling down her cheek.

"What is it Jenny? What's the matter?"

Jenny lifted her little hand up to her daddy. And when she opened it, there was her little pearl necklace. "Here, Daddy, it's for you."

A bit choked up himself, Jenny's daddy reached out with one hand to take the cheap imitation necklace, and with the other hand he reached into his pocket and pulled out a case with a small strand of genuine pearls and gave them to Jenny. He had them that whole time. He was just waiting for her to give up the imitation stuff so he could give her genuine treasure.

Too often, God's children cling to the cheap imitation stuff that is thought to be love only to miss out on the real treasure that is God's love. Therefore, I encourage you this day to learn more about God's perfect love as described so well in the scriptures and seen so clearly in the life and death of Jesus. Keep reading about it and praying about it until you fully believe it, until it finally sinks in, penetrating your heart and changing your life. God's love is powerful and transforming. And as you open yourself more fully to experience that love, you will find that the dark places where fear, anger, jealousy, selfishness and regret have taken hold are being replaced by the light and power of God's love.

So today, I join my voice with John's as I remind you that you are beloved of God. Like John, I hope you get it. For you are exceptionally special, so special that Jesus laid down his life for you. "Beloved" has a wonderful ring to it – may each one of us believe it and live it! Amen.

And now I invite you to a time of Holy Communion. I invite you remember and to be grateful for God's saving love revealed in Jesus' death. But I also invite you to open yourself to the blessing of God's love that is being extended to you right now through the presence of the risen Christ. Because we are a church that practices open communion, all who seek to know and follow Jesus are welcome to eat and drink. We begin our preparation by joining our voices in confession, please pray with me...