

Lover, Beloved, and Love
Epiphany 1C Baptism of Our Lord
Luke 3:15 17, 21 22

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“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

One of the basic things Christians believe about Jesus is that *because* he was the Son of God, the Beloved, the one in whom the Father was well-pleased, he is not only our *pattern* for living a loving life, but he is the *source* of all true love. St. Augustine of Hippo, in Book 8, Chapter 7 of his magisterial treatise, *On the Trinity*, famously describes true love as a trinity of lover, beloved, and the love that binds them together into one. The Holy Trinity as Lover, Beloved, and Love may be seen precisely in this morning's Gospel lesson. In the story of the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan, we hear the Father's voice as that of the Lover, specifically in the paternal sense of that word: he proclaims Jesus his Beloved Son, and the Love the Father pours out upon Jesus after his baptism is the Holy Spirit, who descends upon Jesus “in *bodily* form like a dove.” Note too, that Luke tells us the heavens were opened while Jesus was *praying* after his baptism. *Prayer* is at the center of this Trinitarian Epiphany.

We might be tempted to romanticize this image, and indeed it has been portrayed this way in many great artworks. But I'd like us to try to imagine the particular *embodiment* of this love in the praying person of Jesus. Let us contemplate how through his prayer, divine love is communicated to us, in turn inspiring us, by the Holy Spirit, to live into and out of that love in word and deed in our relationships at home, at work, and in the world at large.

This is no small thing to contemplate, which is why we are given the sacrament of baptism to begin with, as a washing away of our sin. Sin keeps us from loving others as God loves them and as God loves us. Sin consists of the things done and left undone. Sin is the antithesis of love. And yet, Jesus comes to testify that even our imperfect love, weighed down by sin, is no obstacle to his forgiveness. As he says to the Pharisees elsewhere in the Gospels about the woman known to be a notorious “sinner,” the one who anoints his feet and dries them with her hair: “Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.” He said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” So too, Jesus calls us to love much and to receive his forgiveness so that we are set free to flourish as more loving human beings, with God's help.

One way to understand sin is to see it as either a lack of love or excessive love of the wrong object of our affections, whether that object is a person, place, thing, or quality, such as excessive love of power, fame, or wealth. Sin distracts us from the love of God, and from the Beloved, in whom God the Lover is well-pleased, on whom God the Holy Spirit pours out the abundance of God's Love. And I mean to speak of this love in very concrete terms, by asking: What is the loving thing to do? Is there one answer to this question? I believe, in a way, that there is, but it's a little more complicated than asking ourselves, WWJD, “What Would Jesus Do?” and then simply doing that. (Though WWJD *can* be a useful tool for discernment, if we use it to hold ourselves accountable for loving others as Christ first loved us.)

I once had a conversation with a fellow priest who was also a trained therapist. I don't remember the exact details of the conversation, but I do remember it had something to do with the fact that I did not want to tell someone I loved dearly what I really felt, because I was afraid of hurting that person's feelings. The priest surprised me by replying, “Well, that's not a very loving thing to do.” His point was that by withholding a part of myself from the one I loved, even a part that I thought might cause some

conflict and pain, I was deliberately avoiding growing, and even worse, I was depriving that other person of an opportunity to grow in love and mutual understanding.

I was reluctant to agree with him, because it all seemed too risky to me at the time. If I'm honest, it still does! And when I take that risk, there's no guarantee that it won't backfire, as it's far easier said than done. But I believe this little anecdote goes to the heart of the question: What is the loving thing to do?

I am reminded here of the famous passage in Ephesians 4:11-16, where the Apostle Paul writes,

But *speaking the truth in love*, we must *grow up* in every way into him who is the *head*, into *Christ*, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, *promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love*.

The key concept here is that we will not be spiritually mature, we will not be truly Christlike, we will not think or speak or act as the Beloved thinks and speaks and acts until we learn, with God's help, how to *speak the truth in love*.

So to the first part of the question, "what is the loving thing?" is the answer: be truthful. Tell the truth. Tell it even *if* it hurts, but don't tell it *in order to* hurt. One must tell the truth with the intention of cooperating with God to open a channel of God's love, both for the other's sake and for the good of one's own soul. Of course, "the path to Hell is paved with good intentions," so good intentions aren't enough, as I've often found to my sorrow and that of others.

So one test of whether our truth-telling is loving is that it must be *edifying*. As Paul writes just above that famous passage, our efforts must be directed toward "building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." This is true whether we are trying to speak the truth in love at home or at work, in church or out in the world at large. For while Paul is focused here on the specific edification of the church, speaking the truth in love applies equally to those who do not share our faith. We have as much of an obligation, if not more so, to speak the truth in love to those who do *not* believe in Jesus as we have to those who call themselves Christians.

Thus, the loving thing to do in every situation is to tell the truth as one sees it, humbly, simply, and kindly, without condescension, or spite, or malice, fearlessly and courageously. That's a tall order, I know! To tell you the truth, I'm *terrible* at loving in this way. (That's why I'm a preacher, so you will do as I say, and not as I do.) The truth is, *most* of us are terrible at loving each other as the Beloved loves us, because we rarely love others as much as we love ourselves.

Thankfully, it's not all up to us. We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves, but we have access to power from on high, if we avail ourselves of it. Remember, at his baptism Jesus is declared as the Beloved in the midst of *prayer*. This underscores that we do not have to rely on *ourselves* to learn how to become more loving human beings.

The Divine Lover stands ever ready to pour out the Spirit of his Love on us through the Beloved. When we look to the Beloved, we see someone, perfect God and perfect Man, who was fierce with the Pharisees and the moneychangers, yet never spiteful or petty. He was kind to prostitutes and tax collectors, but he never turned a blind eye to the fact that prostitution and extortion are sinful. He knew that these sins hurt not only others but the ones who prostituted themselves and practiced

extortion. When he said, “Go and sin no more,” he meant it. But I think there was always an implied, “with God’s help,” because without that help such an exhortation is useless.

But *with* God’s help, we *can* be a little more like the Beloved. Through daily spiritual discipline, we *can* become, little by little, more loving human beings. This is not easy. In fact, it’s quite difficult, because it has *nothing* whatsoever to do with our *strength*, and *everything* to do with handing over our *weaknesses* to God.

The Beloved, baptized by John in the river Jordan, in his life and ministry and by his death and resurrection shows us that divine love united to our humanity means telling the truth with humility, in the intention to improve our relationships with God and each other through Christ, trusting in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish in us and others what we cannot even ask or imagine.

Relying on the Beloved to teach us how to love is hard. Most of the time we will be afraid to do it, or unwilling to do it. We may not think the other *worthy* of our love, or if that’s not the issue, we might fear that *if* we even attempt to speak the truth in love, we will only make things worse. We will only hurt feelings and cause pain.

Let’s be honest: This may indeed happen. Things sometimes get worse before they get better. We may be disliked, even hated, as a consequence. We may lose people we love. But we must be willing to risk all to speak the truth in love.

You may well ask: “Preacher man, are *you* willing to ‘risk all’ to speak the truth in love?” To tell you the truth, most of the time, I’m not! But I know someone who was: the Beloved, the one in whom the Father was well-pleased. Even when I screw up in my efforts at love, the Beloved is always able to pick up the pieces, to redeem our feeble and fragile efforts and to transform them for the sake of the Divine Lover and Love itself. And knowing this, let us press on in asking God to guide us in speaking the truth as we understand it, knowing full well that none of us has full possession of the truth, but knowing that we are compelled nonetheless, with God’s help, to speak the truth in love, and to speak it ✠ in the name of the Divine Lover, the Beloved, and Love itself. Amen.