

Chosen, Blessed, Broken, and Given

Matthew 3:13-17

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There is a voice out there. It says to you, *If you want to be loved, you better show that you are worth loving, you better prove that you deserve it.*

There is another voice. And the spiritual life is a life in which you gradually learn to listen to that other voice. And that other voice says, *You are the beloved; with you I am well pleased.*

Jesus listened to that voice.

Jesus came up from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens open up and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice from Heaven said, *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*

Jesus heard that voice, and I want you to hear that voice as well.

Usually, when I perform a baptism, when I lower the person into the water, I will say, *You are buried with Jesus in his death.* Then as I lift them back up, *and raised to walk with him*

in new life. Then, just as Jesus heard that voice while still dripping wet from the water of the Jordan, I will say to the person I have baptized, *You are God's beloved son, with you I am well pleased.*

When we are baptized, we identify with Jesus. And just as Jesus heard that voice, you and I need to hear that voice.

That voice tells us who we are. You are God's beloved. And it's there that the spiritual life starts—claiming the voice that calls us you God's beloved.

I want to talk today about the life of the beloved. I read this week an almost twenty year old speech by Henri Nouwen. Henri Nouwen died a few years ago, but he was a well known Catholic priest and writer on the spiritual life. His best known book is called *The Wounded Healer*. He taught at Yale, and then later in his life he left the academic world to become a chaplain at a home for the disabled.

In Nouwen's speech that I read, he is talking about Jesus' baptism, and he talks about the life of the beloved. And he says something that was very powerful to me and that I want to try to communicate with you today.

[many of the ideas of this sermon are derived from Nouwen's speech, "The Life of the Beloved," 30 Good Minutes, May 17, 1991]

The life of the beloved is centered around four words. If you are going to live a life where you claim that voice that calls you beloved, you need to know these four words.

They are four words that come from the gospels, words that are used in the story of the feeding of the 5,000, words that are used at the Last Supper, and words that are used at Emmaus.

The words are: He took, He blessed, He broke, and He gave. Jesus took the bread, and when he had blessed it, he broke it and gave it to them.

Those are the words used when the boy gave Jesus his lunch to feed the 5,000, those are the words used at the last supper, and those are the words used when Jesus met those disciples on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection. They didn't recognize him until then—until he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. Then they knew.

To be taken, to be blessed, to be broken and to be given is the summary of the life of Jesus who was taken, who was blessed by God, broken on the cross, and given to the world. It is also the summary of our life because just as Jesus, we are also the beloved.

When you live the beloved life, you are taken, blessed, broken, and given.

First, we are taken. Perhaps a better word would be chosen or selected. We are chosen by God. That means we are seen by

God in our preciousness, in our individuality. We are seen as precious in God's eyes.

Most of the time, in our life, when one person is chosen it means for the others, *Too bad for you, you are not chosen*. Like when you are a kid and you're picking teams for a game. One is chosen, one is not.

With God, one person being chosen doesn't mean excluding anyone. In fact, the truth is that the more we know we are chosen, the more we will realize that our friends and all people are chosen and seen as precious in God's eyes. The more confident we are in our own chosenness, the more we are able to see it in others.

The life of the beloved starts by trusting that we are chosen in our uniqueness, that we are unique in God's eyes, precious.

The first word is taken, or chosen. The second word is blessed.

That voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism said, *This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased*. Blessed.

As I said, Henri Nouwen left a position at an Ivy League university to become a chaplain at a community for handicapped people. He tells about how there is one of his friends there who is quite handicapped but a wonderful woman.

She said to him, *Henri, can you bless me?* He remembers walking up to her and giving her a little cross on her forehead. She said, *Henri, it doesn't work. No, that is not what I mean.*

He was embarrassed and said, *I gave you a blessing.*

She said, *No, I want to be blessed.* He didn't know what she meant.

They had a little worship service and all these people were sitting there. After the service Henri Nouwen said, *Janet wants a blessing.* He had a long robe with long sleeves.

Janet walked up to him and said, *I want to be blessed.* She put her head against his chest and he spontaneously put his arms around her, held her, and looked right into her eyes and said, *Blessed are you, Janet. You know how much we love you. You know how important you are. You know what a good woman you are.*

She looked at him and said, *Yes, yes, yes, I know.* Nouwen said he suddenly saw all sorts of energy coming back to her. She seemed to be so relieved because suddenly she realized again that she was blessed.

She went back to her place and immediately other people said, *I want that kind of blessing, too.*

The people kept walking up to him and he suddenly found himself embracing people. He remembers that after that, one of the people in their community who assists the handicapped, a strong guy, a football player, said, *Henri, can I have a blessing, too?*

Nouwen remembers their standing there in front of each other and he said, *John,* and he put his hand on John's shoulder, *you are blessed. You are a good person. God loves you. We love you. You are important.*

Can you claim that and live as the blessed one?

We are taken, we are blessed, and then we are broken. We are broken.

That voice at Jesus' baptism quotes from Isaiah 42 where it says: *Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.* It sounds like just a blessing.

But this servant that Isaiah is introducing us to here is the servant that as Isaiah goes on to describe him more fully comes to be known as the suffering servant. As Isaiah continues to describe this servant whom God has blessed and in whom God's soul delights, we see that this chosen and blessed one is also one who will suffer.

Jesus would have known when he heard those words of blessing at his baptism that those words of blessing were directed toward God's suffering servant. Blessed but also broken.

We are blessed and broken.

Blessed in so many ways. We are blessed in so many ways.

Broken, though, too, aren't we? You and I know that we are broken. A lot of our brokenness has to do with relationships. I know each of us can point to a brokenness in our relationships with our husband, with our wife, with our father, our mother, with our children, with our friends.

Wherever there is love, there is also pain. Wherever there are people who really care for us, there is also the pain of sometimes not being cared for enough. Or there is the pain of loss. That pain is the price we pay for having loved someone.

What if we dared, like Jesus who was chosen, blessed and broken, to embrace our brokenness, to befriend it and to really look at it? *Yes, I am hurting. Yes, I am wounded. Yes, it's painful.*

What if we embraced our brokenness instead of hiding from it or ignoring it or papering over it or pretending it wasn't there?

I don't have to be afraid. I can look at my pain because in a very mysterious way our wounds are often a window on the full reality of our lives, including the blessing.

And if we dare to embrace the wounds, then we can put them under the blessing. That is the great challenge.

One of the best movies of my lifetime is "Tender Mercies". It's a Texas story. The film chronicles the story of Mac Sledge, a one-time country-western singing star whose life later dissolved into a fog of alcohol and shiftlessness.

Divorced from his wife and estranged from his only daughter, Mac staggers through life until one night he collapses onto the porch of a small, lonely little motel and gas station out in the middle of nowhere on the Texas prairie. The motel is run by Rosa Lee, a young widow who is raising her son, Sonny, and trying to make ends meet.

Even though Mac is a shipwreck of a human being, grizzled, drunk, and despairing, Rosa Lee takes him in, sets him to work for her, and through this, transformation comes to Mac's life.

Over time he kicks his drinking habit, becomes a kind of father figure to young Sonny, ends up marrying Rosa Lee, and begins to attend the Baptist church in which Rosa Lee is a member of the choir.

In one lovely scene, both Mac and Sonny are baptized one Sunday morning. After the pastor dunks him into the waters of baptism, Mac stands back up, blinking and drenched, water dripping down off his balding head and glistening on his grizzled beard. It's a portrait of grace.

After the service, Sonny and Mac are sitting outside the motel and Sonny says, *Well, we done it. We got baptized.*

Yup, we sure did, Mac replies.

You feel any different? the boy asks.

Chuckling, Mac says, *I can't say I do, not really.*

But we as viewers of the movie know the truth: Mac is different. Deep down on the inside of his heart and soul, Mac is a changed man. Outwardly it's true: the baptism doesn't seem to change much, and it surely doesn't make life necessarily any easier.

In the course of the film Mac manages to have a kind of reconciliation with his estranged daughter, now in her mid-20s. But no sooner does this good thing happen that the daughter is killed in a terrible car wreck.

Near the end of the film, still grieving, Mac stands in the middle of a vegetable garden and tells Rosa Lee that he doesn't understand life.

He can't understand the tender mercies of God that led him to Rosa Lee and to the transformation his life so badly needed. But then, he can't understand why his daughter had to die, either.

We often wonder why bad things happen in life, but Mac is honest enough to admit to being equally unable to understand how and why all those good things happened. Blessing can be as surprising as brokenness. Blessing can be just as unexplainable and undeserved as brokenness. Mostly in life the blessing and the brokenness are all mixed together.

Blessed and broken, all of us. Our main task is to put our brokenness under the blessing. As Henri Nouwen said, if you try to live your brokenness outside of the blessing, even a little brokenness can destroy your life. It is like an affirmation that you are no good and suddenly you say, *You see what has happened? I lost my job. This friend didn't speak to me. She rejected me.* You can hold on to it and see it proven that you are no good. You always thought so.

But if you can put your brokenness under the blessing, within the blessing, allow it to be enfolded into the blessing of God....

Chosen, blessed, broken... and given.

If we live our life as people who are taken, blessed and broken, then we can give ourselves. We are taken, blessed and broken to be given. I really think that our greatest human desire is to

give ourselves. The mystery of God is that as we let go and give for others, that then our lives start bearing fruit.

When we are people who are chosen by God—blessed, broken—we can give ourselves to others. Our life can bear immense fruit. The people who have lived as the beloved, continue to bear fruit generations after they have died. When we think about certain great people we have known, they still give us life. They still give us hope because their lives became fruitful, fruitful in the giving.

I remind you of that story of the feeding of the 5,000. You remember there was a little boy and everybody said that he was not worth anything. It's just an insignificant boy and his lunch.

But, he had five loaves and five fishes. This little boy was received by Jesus and He took these five loaves and five fishes. He broke the bread after having blessed it, and He gave it, and in giving it multiplied and it was enough for everyone to eat.

That story says something about our lives. We are little people, but if we believe that we are chosen, that we are blessed, that we are broken, to be given, then we can trust that our life will bear fruit, that it will mean something, that it will count for something.

It will multiply. And not only in this life, but beyond it.

Chosen, blessed, broken, and given.

Is that the story of your life?