

Called to Believe

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

A Sermon Preached by Peter Ilgenfritz
University Congregational United Church of Christ
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*Water, River, Spirit, Grace,
Sweep over us.
Amen.*

Several years ago the former Archbishop of South Africa, Desmond Tutu was invited to teach a course at a distinguished seminary. He agreed to teach a course called “God’s Love” on two conditions: that it be listed as an “800” level seminar course and be exclusively for senior students preparing for ministry in the local church.

Students signed up quickly for the class. The first day of class went by and the next. At the end of that second day one student raised her hand: “It seems that you forgot something. You forgot to pass us out the syllabus for the class - the schedule of tests, papers and readings.”

“Oh, there are no tests. No papers. No readings”, Tutu responded.

“Well, how then are we going to get graded?,” a student asked.

“Oh, you all get A’s!,” Tutu smiled. “God has very low standards!”

“All we are going to do”, he said, “is tell stories of when we have encountered, experienced God’s love. If you don’t know God’s love in the marrow of your bones, you know nothing.”

Jesus knew God’s love in the marrow of his bones. When Jesus heard, “You are my beloved”, Jesus believed it. That’s what makes Jesus different from the rest of us.

And Jesus wants more than anything for us to claim our identity as the beloved, to let it move right there into the center of our bodies. To rest there. Before all other titles, roles, this is who we are. Not so much grasping and receiving this gift: “You are God’s beloved.”

Baptism doesn’t change our relationship with God. God loves us all equally. What baptism does is put us into a different relationship with Jesus. With Jesus, who shows us the way to be in relationship with God - specifically in and between our relationship with one another. Here is where God is found – here between us.

For Jesus it all comes down to this: Loving God and letting God love us is our call. It is what we were made for.

How do you know if you have God's love in the marrow of your bones?

Last Friday I returned from an eight day Rizen Zen retreat. I have done 10 such retreats in the past five years. It is a highly structured "retreat" that involves mostly sitting meditation or zazen. Meditation for long periods of time – from 4:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. In a cold room.

Now, why, why you ask would you do this?!

Well, first, I must say, that I never would have chosen this practice. In fact it is about the last thing I would have chosen for myself! But like all spiritual practices that stick – it is more like they find us than we find them. And if we are wise, if they work for us, we stick with them no matter how strange a practice it may at first glance seem!

If you want to find out what is in the marrow of your bones, a Zen retreat is a good way to find out. After a day or so of this long sitting your back begins to ache. Your knees ache. Your toes ache. Your neck aches. You ache in places that you didn't even know were in you.

And of course, there is that deeper ache, of fear, anxiety, old history, old wounds that rise up in us, that are in all of us too. When we are in silence our lives show up and our lives and our hearts terrify us. We feel.

In the practice of Zen you learn to not run away from all those aches and pains but to sit with them, to pass through them. To be caught on the other side of them by what is hard to put in words. Beneath all that is in our bones, Love is in our bones. It feels like a great emptiness, spaciousness, connection. It is something fleeting that you cannot grasp and claim. It is a connection to all things, all creation. It is something that is always there whether you know it or not. This open hearted compassion, love, that is God. All around us, within us.

We experience that God's home is in us. We are already at home. We know that God is always at home and we are the ones who go off wandering. To know this you have to take time to slow down, to move at God's speed. To sit in silence and spend time with the One who loves us. To receive this Love.

Now you don't have to take part in an extreme sport like a Zen retreat to experience this. We all have experienced God's love in the marrow of our bones though we often don't name it as such:

It is that feeling when we are forgiven.

When someone is with us when we have needed them.

It is that feeling of pure joy while snowboarding.

Working hard at something like playing the cello and then finally getting it.

We often don't trust that what we know in these particular times is with us always. We often don't trust that God, that Love of God, is with us always, even when we don't feel it. Faith is learning to trust that it never goes away.

Faith, and the secret of living well, is learning to be more like this seagull I saw last week. It was a very stormy day on Puget Sound – wild, crashing waves. I watched the gull ride the waves. Bobbing there up and down in the stormy sea. Paying no particular attention to the waves. Unlike us, it didn't get swamped by a wave coming in over its head. Have to find a way to the surface, shake out, and start again. No, the gull just floated on, on top of the stormy sea. Up and down. Up and down. The gull knew what we long to know: that there is a whole, vast sea beneath us holding us up. We need to be reminded of that.

From the time when Leslie's daughter Gina was baptized, each night Leslie would tuck her into bed and trace her finger on her forehead in the sign of the cross, "Remember. You are God's beloved child."

As Gina grew she learned to trace her own finger on her forehead, "Remember. I am God's beloved child."

Many years later, Gina had moved away. It was a very dark time in Gina's life. One night, late at night, Leslie got a phone call from her daughter.

"Mom, I can't go on. There is nothing you can do. It is not your fault."

Leslie panicked. What can I do? What can I do? Then, she remembered.

She said, "Gina, take your finger and put it on your forehead. Repeat after me, "Remember. You are God's beloved."

There was a long silence.

Then, "Mom, I'm coming home."

Feeling God's love in the marrow of her bones, saved Gina's life.

What if the church helped us speak to each other this way? Recalling us to ourselves.

Here is our ministry: Out of the dark, troubled, murky waters of life, God is calling us home. You are God's beloved.

Into the dark, troubled, murky waters that are our lives, relationships, world, God is calling us out to call others home: You are God's beloved.

How tragic that some of us cannot feel that love we so seek to share. Then, it is to let God do the calling in us: You are God's beloved. Nothing can take that away: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, not principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, can separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8: 38-39) Amen.