

YOU ARE A BELOVED SON OF GOD

I remember when I first heard the above statement thirty-five years ago and felt it in my being. The experience was momentary in the schema of time because to some degree I did not really hear those words, much less really understand and accept them in my spirit, in my heart.

Twenty-five years later, at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico, I was anointed at the Rites of Passage on Saturday evening and again heard the statement, "You are a beloved Son of God." Even then, being in an entirely different place in my life (much older), the words were again new for me. This time, though, they were extremely meaningful. They touched deeper places in my psyche and my spirit was deeply moved.

Here I am, ten years later, and those words still invite me deeper into God's unconditional love. I realize that it has taken a full lifetime to really be able to revel in God's belovedness and experience the joy of being a beloved son of God. How come it took so long, I wonder?

Perhaps we are, or I am, a stiff-necked person. Maybe the impact of those words can only come with age and wisdom. I know I need to practice belovedness in my life. I know unconditional prayer and service comes from love. My sense is that simplicity in life is probably essential. I know that I revel in silence and quiet. Relationship is a key word in all spirituality. Emptying and releasing is a necessary process for me. Dying and rising is essential to living human life in the spirit. That's just the way it is. Presence and momentary living is the only place to be. The basic question always is, "What is the desire of our hearts? What is the desire of my heart?"

Our initial invitation to beloved son-ship is at conception and birth, I would say. Hopefully, we are born into circumstances and environments that are of love in a healthy way. Hopefully, our early formative years are mostly care free and nurturing. Hopefully, our later formative years are supportive, encouraging, and meaningful, in the full gamut of growing up through early and middle adolescence. Hopefully, we have learned some of the basic truths necessary for living life to the full as we approach adult maturity. Maybe initiation, in its positive and truest sense, has been somewhat experienced, at least for a few.

To a great extent, many parents in our culture will not get it perfect in the eyes of their children. At some point, the children will need to accept and forgive whatever their experience was growing up in order to grow into a centered, mature spiritual life. God always makes good of all that is and was and will be. God's only desire is to be one with us. His desire for us is to be one in Him.

The three-day weekend retreat that I was invited to attend by a few coworkers thirty-five years ago initiated a conscious spiritual journey in my life. My "yes" was a realization that there had to be more to this life than I was experiencing. There had to be a fuller way to live life. It was a moment that said it was indeed time to start looking at my life, and come to some idea on how I was going to live the rest of my life. Little did I know what was in store for me as a beloved son.

I heard many things on that weekend long ago that touched my soul. I learned that our basic ideal or motivation in life is to love and be loved. When either of them is lacking, we experience the most painful of human emotions: loneliness. God's friendship and love is offered to us every moment of our lives and is the primary cure for loneliness. Basically, what I was ignoring in my life was the spiritual part of me. It was time to change and live differently.

I heard that I was special in God's eyes. I heard that I had to direct my whole life towards God, who is love. I experienced God's forgiveness and mercy that weekend. I heard that I was the only obstacle to God's love and friendship in my life. I heard that I had to pray and make God a true personal friend through Jesus. I had to study and pray and get to know God personally.

What I began to practice, experience, and understand was the basic command of Jesus: Love God, and love neighbor as you are loving yourself. The word "Love" in the Christian sense simply means to exclude no one (or anything), forgive everyone (and everything). That is the core concept of the Christian Gospel. Acceptance is the first step to inclusion and forgiveness.

What I did, practically, was to be involved, read, share, and accept the invitation to become part of the retreat team. I practiced saying "yes" rather than "no" in a balanced way. I became involved. I learned to pray, took courses, went to school, and became present to others, particularly my family. I changed my job, my hours, and the way I related to others, and began to be very conscious of what was and wasn't happening around me, and not to take it personally. I began to see what was inside of me. I began to honor God and found out that God has always honored me.

As I look back, I see that I have never stopped learning. I see God in every piece of my life and it has all been good. I really would not change a moment. The suffering was necessary. The deaths were necessary. The risings to new life always resulted. Transformation!

People were always there for me, as was God. There are affirmations as I look at all the chapters of my life. Some of them are still absolutely amazing to me. I can say very confidently that I am who God has wanted me to be. I am doing exactly what I am called to do at this moment in my life. If anything, I am being called at this moment to further simplify my life so I can be for others as God needs me to be.

I know I am extremely blessed and graced just to have the life that I do. I am extremely thankful as I daily give praise and honor to my God. I pray with a humble and grateful heart. I still learn from the prayer and the relationship. The depth and intimacy becomes greater. "How do I love?" is an essential question for the spiritual life. Do I really accept, in my deepest self, to some degree at least, that I am loved by God no matter what? That is the primary question.

God loves and accepts all of us as we are. Knowing that in our hearts is key to conversion to a deeper spiritual life. It is key to transformation. I think of my own personal experience of feeling lost and then being found. It is truly Amazing Grace!

The gospel parable about the two sons and the loving father in Luke 15 is the quintessential teaching of Jesus on the love God has for us. It is the basis of one of the Firmings in our Men's Work. The passage emphasizes the basic nature of how we are as human beings and how we are called to love. It shows us how we as human people can get lost in ourselves rather than our relationship with God the Father. It relates a spiritual theme that is found in all religions of the world to some degree. We are all beloved of God.

When I recall some really major hurts in my life, I feel the hurt was essentially not being loved, respected, and honored as a human being by others. There was an exclusion of sorts, a put down, a disrespect or out-and-out victimization of my being. There were times when I even did that to myself. There was a time that I lived every day in that mindset.

The two sons in the prodigal story represent all of us. We are each of them at different times in our lives. Both sons were lost in their own stuff. We get lost in our own stuff. The younger son repented and changed. Hopefully, the older son also repented at some time in his life, although that side of the human coin, the righteous one, can be a very difficult place to see as dark. Any time we are exclusive and unforgiving in our lives needs to be brought to prayer.

The loving father loved both of His sons as they were. He loved them unconditionally. We love both conditionally and unconditionally. Unconditional love makes us most vulnerable to hurt and ridicule. Just remember what happened to Jesus in his death at Calvary.

By the way, the full image of Calvary, with the three crosses, repeats the full gamut of the human story of the prodigal son. This time the central figure is Jesus. On either side of him are two men who are being crucified with Jesus. One asks forgiveness and, of course, receives it. The other stays in his own righteous stuff, failing to see what Jesus offers him. Repentance and the resultant conversion will always mean a dying to self in order to rise to new life.

And it will always be new life when we give over those parts of ourselves that keep us from being in full relationship with God. That's the invitation. Be Jesus in our dying and our rising. Be Jesus in our living. Be Jesus as best we can every single day of our lives.

We will never ever be perfect in this. Accept that and forgive it. The response from others may not ever be appropriate to what you put out there. Forgive them and accept them, for they may not know what they do. The goal is to be an unconditional lover. The objective actions are to include and forgive. The world will not be receptive a lot of the time. Do it anyway, and live as the beloved son of God that you are.

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