

“Embracing Our Belovedness”

Psalm 127:1-2; Mark 12:38-44 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – November 17, 2024

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might know and trust in our hearts that God’s love is for us. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.

We talk a lot around here about God and love. We say that God is love; we say that we are called to love God and that God calls us to love our neighbors. We talk about how we can tell if something is of God by looking to see how it shows love. Sometimes we even sing “Jesus Loves Me.” But I wonder, how deeply do we feel it? How deeply do we know it? Do you trust that God loves you? Do you believe that you are God’s beloved?

“It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved.” Oh my. There’s a verse to sit with. How does it make you feel? Convicted? Judged? Left out? Frustrated? Relieved? Could you believe that you are that beloved? The one whom God gives sleep? I am afraid that we are all too familiar with the taste of the “bread of anxious toil.” It’s dry and off somehow, and it’s as likely to give you a stomach ache as it is to fill you up. And sleep – is there any more fraught subject? Whether you’re in a phase in your life where sleep comes too easily or hardly ever, whether you’re using all the aids available or feeling proud of how few hours you can get by on, sleep can be complicated. To have scripture suggest that good sleep is a sign of God’s love is only going to make it worse.

But what if...? What if it's not saying that if God really loved you, you would always get the right amount of awesome, deep, refreshing sleep? What if it's saying that God's love feels like that? Like you've been granted the space and time to completely relax, like you have no obligations other than taking your rest, like your body can let go, like you are safe and warm and comfy, like you are cradled in the supportive arms of the One who loves you best? Can you imagine what it feels like, in your body, to know that you are God's beloved? Can you imagine what it feels like in your heart and your soul, to know that you're already there, that you don't have to earn that love or keep striving to be worthy of it, because you are already so very, very beloved?

The passage we read from Mark reminds us how much trouble we have trying to have this kind of relationship with God. We may not be scribes, walking around in long robes (well, most of us aren't, anyway!), but we know what it's like to want to be greeted with respect or to enjoy having the seat of honor. We know what it's like to desire affirmation that we are good and worthy and special. We know what it's like to feel like we have to prove ourselves. And that feeling that seems to be driving those attention-seeking scribes seems to carry over into the next story.

Because when we move through life feeling like we have something to prove, we sometimes get very good at striving, and sometimes that does lead to abundance. But it also means that we start to hedge our bets. People might like me for me, but they'll be more likely to like me if I do things for them, or if I have a lot of money, or if I work really hard, or, or.... God might take care of me, but if I invest in a well-diversified

portfolio, then hopefully I'll never have to ask anyone else for help. God probably loves me, but if I wear myself out serving others, then I'll probably get into heaven regardless. I can share some of what I have, since there's plenty, but I can also use the rest to secure influence and favor, to make sure I'll be taken care of.

How does that bread of anxious toil taste? It's bitter, right? And dry? And sour, but not in a good yummy-sour-dough way. And it doesn't settle right. And it doesn't fill the empty places in our bodies or our souls. Because when we live as though we have something to prove, we can never be done; we can never relax. Because maybe there's someone out there who isn't convinced yet. Maybe they like me today, but if I don't keep on keeping on tomorrow, they'll figure out I'm a fraud.

What would it take to stop hedging your bets? What would convince you to try to set all that aside and just believe that you are enough? What could life be like if you could believe that God loves you, that God already loves you and has been loving you and will keep loving you, and there's nothing you can do to change that? What if you could embrace your belovedness? What if you could not just say that God is love, but trust and know that God's love is for you?

There's a lot we don't know about that poor widow whose example Jesus held up to his disciples. But here's one thing we do know: she was still alive, and that was not something she took for granted, because there were probably a lot of reasons she could have been dead before then. We don't know if she wished she could hedge her bets, but we do know that she didn't, because she couldn't afford to. And so she gave it all to

God; she chose to put her trust in God's love and care, without trying to prove herself worthy of it. And I'm guessing that's because the fact that she was still alive had helped her understand that she didn't need to prove anything to anyone, because God was holding her through it all. In a time when it probably seemed like everything else had been stripped away, like no one thought she was worth anything, she had experienced God's love carrying her forward. Her trust was in God and God alone, because God is the one who had sustained her through it all.

Was Jesus naïve to think that any of us could achieve that level of trust without also having everything else taken away from us? Could we? Could we at least stop living as though we have something to prove? Can we seek release from the anxious toil that spoils our bread and our rest? Could you embrace your belovedness? What would that look like? What would you quit doing? What would you start doing? What would you no longer be afraid of?

You are God's beloved. God wants you to have your daily bread and good, nourishing sleep. God wants you to flourish and be fruitful. You do not have to pass a test first. You do not have to keep striving to prove yourself worthy. You do not have to butter God up or show other people how very pious and faithful you are. God loves you. Just as you are. Already and still and forever. Embrace your belovedness. Trust your belovedness. Believe in your belovedness. And you will find yourself living out of abundance in any circumstance. Hallelujah and Amen.