

WGUMC January 14, 2018 Mark 1:9-11; Psalm 139:1-18
"What the World Needs to Hear: You are Beloved"

I love animals. In fact, when I was in high school, I wanted to go into veterinary medicine. But by the time I was applying for colleges, I had decided that it would be better for me to go into human medicine. Then when I was a sophomore in college, I got the call to go into soul medicine. I guess God was telling me that if you really want to get at the root of all the world's problems, you have to go right to the source, which is the human soul. Animals have nothing to do with it.

Though I had to give up my horses to become a pastor, I still have a dog. Dogs are great. They make better people than most of the people I know. Think about it. They are pretty easy to please. They don't have many worries. They seem genuinely happy. They are less inclined than most people to make messes and more inclined to feel sorry about it when they do. Fewer of them have fragile egos. I'd have to say that, by and large, they

have better self-esteem and are less self-destructive than a lot of human beings.

I sometimes think how the world would be a better place if people were more like their pets. Forget the political parties; let's recruit some new candidates from the Humane Society! Remember the dog that was elected three times as mayor of a little town in Minnesota? Dogs are so electable because they are so lovable and, what's more, they seem to know it. They are certainly eager to share it.

It makes me sad to think that the average person has so much trouble believing what the average dog seems to intuitively know: that they are beloved. I can just imagine the scene: Everyone goes down to the river Jordan to be baptized, then comes up out of the water. But when the heavens open up and the Spirit comes down, and the voice of God thunders, "You are my Sons, you are my Daughters, you are the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," about half of them don't believe it!

Hollywood and Washington are full of folks like that. Show business and politics attract all kinds of people who can never get enough affirmation. They don't know or can't admit to themselves that no amount of money or power or fame will ever fill the hole that is in their soul. But they aren't the only ones who have trouble believing that they are as lovable as Lassie. As a pastor, I have run into many faithful Christians who read their Bible every day, come to church every week, have heard it said a thousand times that God loves them and still they can't allow themselves to feel loved.

Too bad most of them can't remember their baptisms. Baptism is a sacrament, a visible sign of the invisible truth that the person being baptized is a beloved child of God. In baptism we publicly acknowledge what it says about us in Psalm 139, that it was God who formed our inward parts and knit us together in our mother's womb. It was God's eyes that beheld our unformed substance and in God's book were written all the

days that were formed for us when none of them as yet existed. In baptism we say that this child of God, every child of God, is fearfully and wonderfully made.

Let's be clear: baptism doesn't make the child beloved. God does and God loved them even before the baptism. But when we baptize babies, we get to say that out loud and we make a commitment to keep saying it. We ask for the grace to keep living it until that child is old enough to accept that grace and confirm for herself what we have said about her all along.

There's one problem. We typically do confirmation around the age of 12 or 13, when a lot of adolescents are convinced that they are anything but beloved. Perhaps it would be better to do confirmation when they reach their late teens or twenties. And then repeat it again when they get to 40 or 50.

Everybody loves babies. It's easy for the church to say that babies are beloved, but when those babies grow up, churches haven't always sent the same message. Too many

times and in too many places, churches have said: You are not beloved... because you had sex before marriage, because you got an abortion, because you're in a same-sex relationship, because you got divorced, or lots of other reasons: because you're an addict, because you have dark skin or because you're undocumented...the list goes on.

But what some Christians don't realize is that God's love is a gift that no one can take away. God planted it there when each of us was being made in secret. When we were being intricately woven in the depths of the earth, love was there, weaving into us the very image of God. So God's love is in our DNA.

Now we may all agree that love is a gift we cannot take away from anyone else, and yet too many of us still deny it to ourselves. No matter how many sermons I preach, there will still be people in the pews who will deny that God loves them or that they could ever feel beloved. So what can a pastor do?

Well, I hate to admit that there are dogs who are better teachers than I am a preacher, and today I want you to think about dogs who end up at the shelter. Most of them are of mixed breed. Some of them have been abused and have behavioral problems. They pace, they bark, they pee all over, they chew on furniture. Many of them are old, given up by people who couldn't take care of them or didn't want to. Many of them have been scraped up and scarred up, missing a patch of fur here, an eye there, several teeth, part of an ear or tail, even a leg. Too many of them are pit bull crosses and what I call "rat-dog" mixes. Some of them are so gosh-darn ugly that we can't help but think they are cute. And that's just it, isn't it? The truth is that there is nothing in their appearance or in their pedigree or in their history that would make us want to take them home and love them, and yet we do.

So the next time you look at that mutt lying at your feet looking up at you, I want you to tell yourself that God looks at

you with infinitely more love than when you look at your dog. Despite all your scars, God thinks you are the most adorable thing God has ever seen. Despite the fact that God is acquainted with all your ways, knows all your history, knows all your behavioral issues, has heard your every bark and witnessed your every bite, God wants nothing more than to rescue you and take you to your forever home and love you to death and then back to life.

I'd like to think that if Jesus came today he would come with a dog. I vote for a golden retriever. It would be one of those service dogs that go to hospitals, nursing homes, disaster zones, anywhere there is a need. I say that because Jesus would know that dogs make very good disciples. They would follow him wherever he went and never abandon him when he was in trouble. But they are also really good at getting love into the hard heads and hearts of human beings. And isn't that what Jesus was born, lived and died to do?

You've seen the bumper sticker. I don't know if I can ever be the person my dog thinks I am, but by the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can all be—in fact, we don't have to wait for the heavens to open or the dove to descend, for we already are—the beloved sons and daughters that God created us to be. We just have to preach it until we believe it.