

“THINGS I WISH MY FRIEND KNEW: I – GOD LOVES THEM!”

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John 3:16-21

Whenever I have a Sunday off, I make it a practice to go and worship at other churches. Sometimes I go to Grace United Methodist Church in Wilmington for their phenomenal music; other times I'll drive down to Middletown to hear my friends preach. But no matter where I end up, I'm always fascinated by what I see as I'm driving around on those Sunday mornings. And I'll tell you what I see – where people are, who aren't in church! You want to know where they are? Gyms and grocery stores! I'm not kidding – those parking lots – gyms and grocery stores – are packed on Sunday mornings!

Now, being a person whose job it is to draw people into church on Sunday mornings, I have to wonder why they're there and not here. And then, I start thinking about some of my family and my friends – who aren't here or in any church this morning either. How about yours? How about your family and your friends – are they in church this morning?

Unless you've had your head buried in the sand, you know that church attendance is shrinking – across the board – no denomination has been spared. The rise of people claiming to have no faith affiliation on surveys is astounding. It used to be that people were wary of letting others know they didn't go to church – now it doesn't matter – there is no stigma attached to it.

When asked why they don't attend church, people have lots of reasons.

- “Oh, I went to church when I was a kid, but after I grew up I just got out of the habit.”

Or –

- “My kid's soccer/baseball/whatever team plays on Sunday mornings and if he/she isn't there, they'll get kicked off the team.”

Or –

- “I don't like organized religion. Besides, the church is full of hypocrites.”

Or –

- “I don't need to go to church to worship God. I can worship Him just as well on the golf course or on my boat, in the beauty of His creation.”

Or – sadly –

- “I don’t go to church because I was hurt in church and won’t go back – hurt because somebody talked about me, hurt because they told me I couldn’t do something, hurt because they didn’t include me, hurt because they didn’t notice when I was sick or hadn’t been there . . . well, the list goes on and on.”

Or –

- “I don’t go to church because church is filled with perfect people who have it all together (clearly, they haven’t been here, because if they had, they’d know that we’re all sinners standing in the need of grace – and that’s why we’re here). Nevertheless, that’s the way they feel from the outside looking in.”

It’s that last group I want to talk about for a bit this morning – those who don’t come to church because they don’t feel worthy. They’re afraid that they need to have it all together, and look a certain way, and speak a certain way – and if they can’t, they won’t come in the door.

It is those people for whom my sermon title is directed. It is those people that we wish knew how much God loves them.

The late priest and writer Henri Nouwen wrote a wonderful little book entitled *Life of the Beloved* and in it he writes this, “You and I don’t have to kill ourselves. We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends loved or wounded us. That’s the truth of our lives. That’s the truth I want you to claim for yourself.”

The truth that says, “I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother’s womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch.” (Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, p. 30)

Every time I read those beautiful words from Nouwen, I remember a story that Tony Campolo tells from his childhood, which I might have told you before, but bears repeating. Tony grew up in the city of Philadelphia and he said it was somewhat dangerous to walk to school there. So his mother paid a girl by the name of Harriet five cents a day to get Tony to and from school safely.

Well, the older he got, the more Tony didn’t like this practice, so one day he went to his mother and said that he would be okay on his own, so why didn’t she give him the nickel a day instead? Hesitantly, she agreed, and told him that he could save the money to buy Christmas presents for his sisters. Whatever – he was just glad not to have Harriet hovering over him.

Years later, at a party, Tony was retelling this story about how he had gained this independence as a child, and his sisters were within earshot, and started laughing. “Did you really think you went to school and came home from school alone?” they said. “Every day when you left the house Mom followed you. And every day at the end of the school day she was there, but she made sure you didn’t see her. Didn’t you find it odd (they added) that when you got home and knocked on the door, it took her a minute to answer? That’s because she had gone around and gone in the back and had to make her way to the front door to let you in. All that time you thought you were on your own, and in reality she had been watching over you all the time!” (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 9)

That friends, is how God loves us, and that is how God loves even those who don’t know how much He loves them. Perhaps one of the reasons they don’t know it, is because we live in a world that oftentimes calls us anything but beloved. Nouwen’s words again: “It certainly is not easy to hear that voice (that says ‘You are my Beloved’) in a world filled with voices that shout: ‘You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless, you are despicable, you are nobody – unless you can demonstrate the opposite.’” (Nouwen, p. 26)

Sadly, too often, Nouwen is right. It is a tough world, and so much of the time we have to prove ourselves worthy of being loved or even liked. We’re judged in so many different ways, and we crave approval by others.

Yet, as God’s beloved, we don’t have to do that. We’ve loved already, we’re worthy already – God’s gifts to us in Christ Jesus.

One of my favorite authors, James W. Moore, has written a book with the most wonderful title, which is: *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture is On It!* Any of you with children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews or precious friends know what that means. Like you with those dear ones, God loves to look at you and celebrate you and love you, He delights in you!

So – back to our family and friends who aren’t in church, because perhaps they don’t realize that. What can we do about them? What can we do for them?

Well, let me suggest a few things this morning. Tell them – tell them about us, tell them about who we are and what we’re like. Tell them the truth – that we’re here, not because we’re perfect, but because we love and need God, that we’re sinners standing in the need of God’s grace and guidance and care.

Tell them that we have problems just like they do – family problems, money problems, marriage problems, work problems. Tell them that we cry like they do, and it’s okay to cry here.

But tell them also that we laugh here as well – a lot! And we celebrate here as well – a lot! And we work together on projects here and accomplish great things here together – each of us using our different gifts to make things happen!

Most of all, we focus on God together here. We take the time each week to focus on God in worship and study and fellowship. We know that He has blessed us, and together, we give Him the gift of time and praise. It's one of the best times in our week!

And then, invite them to come with you. Tell them they can just come and be. They don't have to do anything, we won't make them stand up and introduce themselves, they can just come and be – no pressure.

You know what friends, there are a whole lot of people out there who would come in here if someone would just ask them, but no one ever has. So think about maybe someone you could ask to come to our special 4th of July worship service – which is actually on the 3rd! That would be a good first service for someone to attend.

Or maybe ask a family to come and be a part of our Vacation Bible School – again – another good first way for someone to start.

Well, you get the idea. It's up to you and me to help people take the first step to knowing that they are God's beloved child. Don't you want to help make that happen?

I want to close with an image for you to think about. A few weeks ago, my nephew Bo and his wife Christy, had some pictures taken of their family by a professional photographer. They were taken outside and the pictures were just precious. But one stood out among all the others – it was a picture of their two little girls – Isabella (Izzy that some of you know from Sunday School and nursery and seeing her at coffee hour) who's three going on four, and Aubree, who is ten months old. They wore matching navy blue sun dresses, they both had headbands with bows in their hair, and they were sitting in the grass. And Izzy was leaning over taking Aubree's hand as Aubree smiled up at her. It is absolutely precious!

And it is, for me, and I hope for you, a beautiful image of who we are to be in this world – those who reach over to others, especially those who don't know the love of Jesus Christ – and take their hand, and lead them to Him – to the Lord who was there, as the hymn we're about to sing says, to hear their bawling cry, and will be with them to the end. It's who we are called to be and what we are called to do. May it be so.

Amen.