

When I was on the staff of Naramata Centre, I worked with three other women to develop a pastoral care training program called "New Life and Abundant Care." It was designed for clergy, pastoral care providers, social workers, nurses – people in caring professions who wanted to learn new skills for caring for people emotionally and spiritually. The program's name was grounded in the gospel of John and the text attributed to Jesus "I came that they might have life and have it abundantly."

I coordinated the team that brought three healing disciplines together:

Healing touch. Participants who came to the program completed level one of the Healing Touch International Curriculum. New Life and Abundant Care actually spawned Naramata Centre's Healing Pathway Program. Rochelle Graham was the teacher and at the time was Director of Mission Effectiveness at St. Paul's Hospital

Music. The first year a music therapist brought input about music's capacity to bypass the speech centre of the brain, helping patients to remember their stories and evoke emotional healing. The ensuing years, music was led by Barbara Myers, a United Church musician by day and a former lounge singer by night.

Hospice. The pastoral care component was led by Vicki Lannie, director of hospice services at the Methodist Medical Centre in Peoria Illinois. She brought her experience in death and dying to the work of dealing with people, where they're at. Vicki was a student of Elisabeth Kubler Ross.

I bet you wish you could have been part of that line up of learning. We ran the program for four years and many participants reported it to be one of the most important continuing education programs they'd ever taken.

We had a room full of caregivers, pastoral care providers, preachers and pastors, nurses; each one giving fully, sacrificially to their respective calls to ministry. But invariably, in the opening check in about who was there, and what people were looking for, nearly everyone felt some guilt for taking this kind of time away from their clients or their patients. They thought it was a huge investment of time and money, and there was no small amount of pressure on the team to make sure the time and the money were not wasted. The possibility that these participants might come and be cared for themselves seemed like a selfish and self-centered thing to do.

I remember one minister from Alberta, curled up in vertical fetal position arms completely wrapped around her legs, weeping from exhaustion and wrestling with her own guilt about being in a program where the learning might revolve around her own healing. New Life and Abundant Care was about finding life, being cared for while learning new capacities for caring.

Today we hear the incredible story of John the Baptist aghast that Jesus should come to him to be baptised. He says "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John had been calling those around him to a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. He has just called the Pharisees a brood of vipers that they should hide their corruption behind this action. John belittles himself – "I should be baptized by you." But blameless, selfless, "son of God" Jesus comes to be baptized? John asks the question the church has been asking since its inception.

How is it possible that you - the son of God, blameless, spotless, perfect - would undergo a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins? Surely Jesus was sinless. Why would he do such a thing? Christians have been confounded by that question for 2000 years.

Not my point this morning. This morning, and not for the first time, I'm seeing the clouds open, the spirit descend like a dove, and I'm hearing the words spoken to Jesus "you are my son, the beloved, on you my favour rests." What happens when I do this:

"Adam, you are my son, the beloved, on you my favour rests."

"Barbara, you are my daughter, the beloved, on you my favour rests."

Etc.

What happened? What did you experience? How many wrestle with that idea? How many are struggling right now with the idea that you are the beloved, upon whom God's favour rests. These are really difficult words to hear if we don't believe it about ourselves.

Let me share with you the writing of my spiritual hero. Henri Nouwen. Nouwen was a Jesuit priest who lived in the world of the academic elite as a professor at Harvard. He gave that up in the last ten years of his ministry to become the pastor of the L'Arche Daybreak Community for mentally handicapped adults in Toronto. Nouwen's writing has been pivotal to my own spiritual development, but his last book, written after he died, revealed just how much he struggled with his own belovedness.

Nouwen wrote this little book to a friend who had asked him to write for people who had no religious convictions. What did it mean to live a spiritual, but not religious life. And here's what he wrote: (read from Nouwen's "Life of the Beloved")

I've quoted Nouwen in our words for meditation this morning. "The greatest gift I can give to you is the gift of your belovedness. I can give that gift only insofar as I have claimed it for myself. Isn't that what friendship is all about: giving to each other the gift of our belovedness?"

Remember all those caregivers that gathered for New Life and Abundant Care: unable to rest in the grace of healing for themselves? Can you see how impossible it is for us to be effective in our own giving, loving, caring – if we aren't also giving, loving, caring for ourselves - first.

I put my hands on Adam and Barbara...and and and, attempting to give them all the gift of their belovedness. And listen to the challenge; I can give that gift only insofar as I have claimed it for myself. What does that say about me? If I don't believe it about myself, how can I possibly believe it about them? And what does it say about those I love to hold grudges and old scores against? They are the beloved too. But they can only be the beloved insofar as I see myself as the beloved.

For me this changes everything. There is no one who is not the beloved, right where they are. And I can give that to them insofar as I have claimed it for myself. That's what we do for each other. We give to each other, the gift of our belovedness. This is all the church can be. This is the community amenity we offer the world. When I see the kind of world that betrays this promise, I'm convinced more than ever that claiming our belovedness is the most difficult and the most countercultural thing we can do.

As we remember the waters of Jesus' baptism, we remember our own. More importantly, I invite you to claim your identity - you are a child of God, the beloved – claim that identity, for the healing of the world. Amen.