

Whispered in Your Ear

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Who whispered in your ear when you were very young? Whose whispering voice do you still hear even now, lo, these many years later? Who whispered in your ear and told you who you are in a way that helped shape the person you would become? And what did that whispering voice say?

When I was in Israel after Easter, I learned about a beautiful Muslim practice. As soon as a baby is born, the adhan—the call to prayer—is whispered into the baby’s right ear. It begins, “Allahu Akbar”—which means, “Allah is great,” or “God is great.” So the word “God” is the first word a baby hears, whispered in her right ear as soon as she is born. And this is the same call to prayer that is issued five times a day. In Muslim areas it echoes through the streets in a haunting chant. Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, the call to prayer finds you, and if you are Muslim, it is a reminder of what was first whispered in your ear when you were born:

Allah is great, Allah is great.

I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship but Allah.

I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.

Hasten to the prayer, hasten to the prayer.

Hasten to real success, hasten to real success.

Allah is great, Allah is great.

There is none worthy of worship but Allah.

And after that is whispered in the baby’s right ear, the command to rise and worship is whispered in the baby’s left ear—which is the same as the adhan, but with the added phrase, “Prayer is ready, prayer is ready.” So when a Muslim child is born, the first word he hears in his right ear and then in his left is the whispered name of God in a call to prayer and a call to worship. It strikes me as a powerful way of commending God and honoring God and binding a child to God in the very first moments of life. So who whispered in your ear when you were very young? Whose whispering voice do you still hear even now, lo, these many years later? Who whispered in your ear and told you who you are in a way that helped shape the person you would become? And what did that whispering voice say?

Jesus was an adult when he came to the waters of the Jordan to be baptized by John, but in Matthew’s Gospel the story is told almost as if it is a second birth narrative. Before this story, Jesus does not speak. He does not act, either, at least not in any way that Matthew found worth recording. But when Jesus emerged from the baptismal waters, dripping like an infant fresh from the womb, the Spirit of God descended upon him and a voice from heaven said, “You are my Son, the Beloved; my favor rests on you.”

How different it would be if this declaration of God’s favor had occurred later in Jesus’ life. It would sound very different if it were said only after Jesus had healed the sick, embraced the outcast, and preached good news to the poor. It would be very

different because then we might conclude that God's favor was upon him because of all he had done, that in some way Jesus had earned the blessing. Instead, Jesus was immersed in God's favor before he had an opportunity to say anything or do anything. The very first words that Jesus heard as he emerged from the womb of baptism were like words whispered in a baby's ear: "You are my Son, the Beloved; my favors rests on you."

Perhaps that is the voice, and perhaps those are the words, that Jesus continued to hear throughout his life. To love so completely as Jesus did, he had to have known that he was completely loved. I imagine that he held those words, and the blessing they conveyed, very close, in every hour, especially when events turned hard and people turned away and the cries of the crowd turned nasty — perhaps then he would hear again the words of love still echoing in his ears, "You are my Son, the Beloved; my favor rests on you." How else would he have been able to respond to hostility and betrayal with love, unless he felt so loved himself, in whatever circumstance still drenched with love and soaking in love, the love that declared, "You are my Son, the Beloved; my favor rests on you."

In some ways, of course, it was a unique blessing. When God called Jesus "my Son," it speaks of the unique relationship that Jesus has with the one he called his "Abba," his "Papa." But scripture also affirms that, through Jesus, we are all drawn into an intimate relationship with God, so that now we are all children of God. So what was said to Jesus when he was baptized is the same that could be said to anyone who is baptized: "You are my child, my Beloved; my favor rests on you."

Who whispered in your ear when you were very young? Whose whispering voice do you still hear even now, lo, these many years later? Who whispered in your ear and told you who you are in a way that helped shape the person you would become? What did that whispering voice say? And did you hear the voice say, "This is my child, my beloved; my favor rests on you?"

It can be difficult to hear that voice. There are a lot of other voices out there, the voices of friends, strangers, and family members, the voices of the culture at large that speak with an amplified voice that is impossible to escape. The voice that calls you "beloved" can be all but drowned out by those other voices that may say very different things like, "You're nothing special," "You're worthless," "You're nobody," "You don't matter, not really."

There are still other voices that also make it difficult for us to hear the voice that calls us "beloved," and ironically those are the voices of praise, saying things like, "You're an excellent student," "You're going to go places," "You're really a special person," "You're a good father," "You're a gifted teacher." "You're such a good listener," "Your children are so polite," "You're always there for other people," "You have a lot to be proud of." Now, obviously, we all need praise on occasion, and we all need to offer praise as well. But words of praise can make it harder for us to hear the voice that calls us "beloved." After all, to be praised and to be beloved are very different.

Praise is something you earn. You have to do something to be praised. And if we seek praise often enough and receive it eagerly enough, it can come to seem as if everything—even love—must be earned. If we seek praise often enough and receive it eagerly enough, we can get the impression that to be valued, we must do something, preferably something special, and to keep receiving praise, we must keep doing more.

So the person who is motivated by praise is quite different from the one who feels assured that he or she is beloved. To be called “beloved” is not something that can be earned. It is a gift. There is nothing you have to do to be beloved; there is nothing you *can* do to be beloved. You are God’s beloved not because of what you do, but simply because you are God’s beloved. Even before you have had a chance to do anything that could be called special, God whispers in your ear, “This is my child, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased.”

But it’s hard to hear that voice sometimes. In fact, I believe that one of the reasons we are so determined to distinguish ourselves in some way is because we can’t hear the voice that calls us “beloved.” Being special, different, a cut above, is the only way we know to keep from being lost in the crowd. We’re afraid of feeling forgotten, of going unnoticed.

And we will do almost anything to distinguish ourselves as special. All the praise we seek. All the recognition. The trophy. The degree. The office. The job. The promotion. The address. The accomplishment of our children. All the ways we endeavor to stand out, to enlarge the scope of our lives. All the ways we use to assure ourselves that we matter, that we have a place in the world, that we are loved. All because we assume we have to do something to be valued.

Over the years I have wondered what it was like when I was first learning to walk. In fact, I think I have speculated on that from this very pulpit. After all, it was a big day. At least, I imagine it was. I don’t remember it exactly. So, although all of my stories are true, this may not be one of them. But, anyway, I imagine it went something like this: I stood at one end of the room with my mother and my father a full three steps away. Before that day I could probably do the kind of creative dangling that almost looks like walking, when somebody held me by the hands and shifted me from side to side as my feet barely touched the floor. But this was the day when I would try a real honest walk on my own—all holds barred—with just two eager parents miles apart there to cheer me on. So I set out, wobbling at first, stumbling at second, but unmistakably making it on my own from one set of arms to the other. And then I imagine that my father lifted me high in the air with an exultant shout as if no one in human history had ever walked before. Then, after numerous kisses and exclamations, I probably felt like the most loved, most marvelous boy in all the world.

After a time I could walk with more assurance, but for some reason, I didn’t receive so much praise. In fact, I can’t remember the last time that anyone praised me for walking across a room. So I had to do other things. Simply walking just wasn’t enough anymore. I had to strive to make a splash in other ways, just to get back to that feeling, that feeling of being noticed, of being picked up with a shout of delight, of being valued.

And in all that striving it is easy to lose sight of the fact that my parents did not praise me because of my accomplishments. Rather, they praised my accomplishments because they loved me and would have loved me if there had been no accomplishments to praise.

A woman of great accomplishment once confided that she felt as if she had to have her name in the newspaper on a regular basis to be noticed by her parents. She thought she had to do something to earn their love, and only recently has she come to see that her striving did not increase their love, that she didn’t have to do anything noteworthy to be noticed by them, that she did not have to do anything special to be special to them.

For the most part, we don't have much experience with unconditional love, so we try to create conditions in which we will feel worthy of love. We do not trust love without reasons, so we strive to forge reasons for the love received.

If parents sometimes have something like unconditional love, a love without reasons, for their children, how much more does God love God's children? In the eyes of God all of our striving for distinction is so unnecessary. It is trying to win something that is ours already. God values you, not because you have distinguished yourself in some way, but because you are God's beloved. You don't have to take those stumbling baby steps, no less change the world, for God to love you.

Many people may have whispered in your ear when you were very young. You may still hear some of their voices, lo, these many years later, telling you who you are in a way that shaped the person you would become. Some of those voices are probably encouraging, while other voices you may have spent much of your life trying to silence. But before all of those voices, and above all of those voices, is the one voice that, before you could do anything or say anything to distinguish yourself in any way said, "This is my child, the beloved; my favor rests on you." That voice gets drowned out a lot, living in the kind of world we do, being the kind of people we are. And that's why we come back here each week—to be reminded, in some way to hear that voice again, to hear from the one who calls us "beloved." We come here to silence, for a time, all the distracting and detracting voices, so that the Spirit of the Living God might whisper again in our ears, "You are my beloved." We listen for that word week after week, not just so that we might receive it as a blessed assurance, but so that we might then be equipped to love others. To hear and truly know that we are the beloved of God in its own way equips us to serve better than the most impassioned call to action. To love others, as Jesus did, we first are reminded that we are loved and have been before the beginning, even as Jesus was.