

YOU ARE BELOVED

A devotion by Pete Pollak

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Just briefly about me. My name is Pete. I am a husband and a dad of five. I work in the medical device world, and at the same time I am finishing my fourth year of seminary at Duke Divinity School. I am also starting my second year of work as a hospital chaplain at St Joseph's Candler in Savannah. None of that lives in neat boxes. It all overlaps. And living in the middle of all of that has taught me how easy it is to forget the most basic truth about myself. That truth is this. Before anything else, I am beloved.

Let's start with something honest.

A lot of us know the right answers. We know what we are supposed to say. We know what the Church teaches. We know the verses. We know the theology. We know that God loves us. And yet, if we are really honest, many of us do not feel beloved. We feel tolerated. We feel useful. We feel forgiven, maybe. But beloved often feels like a stretch.

Some of us walk around with this quiet assumption that if people really knew us, they would step back. That if God really looked closely, He might sigh. That maybe He loves us in theory, but not with delight.

And this is where the spiritual life gets real. Because Christianity is not just about knowing what is true. It is about choosing to live as if it is true, even when you do not feel it yet.

Henri Nouwen understood this deeply. And it helps to know who he was. Nouwen was a Catholic priest, a gifted spiritual writer, and a professor who taught at places like Yale and Harvard. On the outside, his life looked impressive. He was brilliant, respected, and widely published. But he was also remarkably honest about his inner life. He wrote openly about loneliness, insecurity, and the deep ache to be loved. Later in life, he left the academic world to live and serve in a community with people who had profound intellectual disabilities. It was there, in a place with no applause and no prestige, that he came to understand something essential. His worth was not rooted in achievement, but in being God's beloved. When Nouwen speaks

about choosing to live as a beloved son or daughter, he is not speaking from a pedestal. He is speaking from the middle of the struggle.

He once wrote that he did not often feel like a beloved child of God, but that he knew it was his most primal identity. And because it was true, he had to choose it, again and again, even when everything inside him resisted it.

That is the invitation for us today. Not to feel beloved. But to choose to live as someone who is. There is a huge difference. Most of us spend our lives trying to answer the question, Who am I? And we usually answer it with the wrong material.

We say, I am what I do.
I am what I produce.
I am how people respond to me.
I am my mistakes.
I am my success.
I am my reputation.
I am my shame.
I am my failures.
I am my achievements.

And then something happens. We fail. Or we disappoint someone. Or we lose something. Or we get criticized. Or we fall back into a sin we thought we were past. And suddenly our entire sense of self collapses.

Why? Because we built our identity on something that was never meant to carry that weight.

Nouwen says something radical. You are not what others think about you. You are not even what you think about yourself. You are not what you do. You are not what you have.

You are a beloved son. You are a beloved daughter.
That is not poetry. That is not sentiment. That is reality.
Before you had accomplishments, God loved you.
Before you had failures, God loved you.
Before you had words, God loved you.

Before you were useful, impressive, productive, faithful, disciplined, or consistent, God loved you.

Scripture tells us that you were known before you were conceived. That you were knit together in your mother's womb. That your life was not an accident, not an afterthought, not a cosmic coincidence. And yet, even knowing all of that, we still struggle.

Why?

Because strong emotions are powerful. Shame is loud. Self rejection feels convincing. Self hatred can feel honest. Those feelings toss us around like waves.

But here is the key truth. Feelings are powerful, but they are not authoritative. You are free to respond to them. You do not have to obey them.

This is where maturity in the spiritual life begins. When you stop asking, What do I feel? and start asking, What is true?

Proverbs gives us this line that many of us have heard since childhood. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.

Notice what it does not say. It does not say, Trust in the Lord when it makes sense. It does not say, Trust in the Lord when your emotions agree. It does not say, Trust in the Lord when your self assessment feels positive.

It says, Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. That includes your emotional understanding of yourself. Some of us lean heavily on our interior commentary. The voice that says, You are not enough. You are behind. You are broken. You are a problem. You are a disappointment. And we confuse familiarity with truth. Just because a voice is loud does not mean it is right.

Nouwen offers something very practical. He says, look in the mirror each day and claim your true identity. That might sound simple, maybe even

uncomfortable. But think about how often you look in the mirror and do the opposite.

We look and criticize.

We look and compare.

We look and condemn.

We look and replay regrets.

We look and reinforce lies.

What would happen if instead, you looked at yourself and said, I am a beloved son of God. I am a beloved daughter of God.

Not because you earned it.

Not because you feel it.

But because it is true.

This is not pretending. This is obedience.

Faith is not pretending something is true. Faith is choosing to stand on what God has said, even when your feelings have not caught up yet. Nouwen says, act ahead of your feelings and trust that one day your feelings will match your convictions. That line matters.

So many people think that healing begins with feeling better about themselves. But often, healing begins with choosing to live as if the truth is already real.

You do not wait until you feel loved to live as someone who is loved.

You do not wait until you feel worthy to live as someone who is valued.

You do not wait until shame is gone to stop agreeing with it.

You choose now. And you continue to choose.

That is what spiritual practice looks like.

Every day, you reclaim your primal identity.

Not my job.

Not my role.

Not my success.

Not my failure.

Beloved.

This changes everything.

It changes how you pray. Because you are not begging for attention. You are responding to Someone who already delights in you.

It changes how you repent. Because repentance is no longer self punishment. It is returning home.

It changes how you handle failure. Because failure no longer defines you. It refines you.

It changes how you treat other people. Because when you know you are beloved, you stop trying to steal worth from others.

It changes how you hear criticism. Because correction no longer threatens your identity.

This does not mean life gets easier overnight. It means life gets truer.

There will still be days when you do not feel it. Days when shame feels louder than Scripture. Days when your own understanding feels more convincing than God's promises. On those days, you do not wait. You choose.

You say, Lord, I do not feel like Your beloved child today. But I trust You more than I trust my feelings. You acknowledge Him in all your ways. And He directs your path. This is not about hype. This is not about positive thinking. This is about grounding your life in the deepest truth available.

You are not an accident.

You are not a problem.

You are not a disappointment.

You are not a burden.

You are not your worst moment.

You are not your strongest emotion.

You are beloved.

So today, choose it.

Tomorrow, choose it again.

And when you forget, choose it again.

One day, by God's grace, your heart will begin to rest where your faith has been standing all along.

Amen.