

BELOVEDNESS

Finding God (and Self) on Campus

**edited by
JAMES FRANKLIN & BECKY ZARTMAN**



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**For all our students,
who taught us how
to be in ministry
on campus.**

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AN INVITATION TO BELOVEDNESS

What we wish for you, more than anything else, is for you to know how beloved you are.

We know this concept of belovedness sounds woo-woo, like we're going to break out some crystals and set some good intentions. We know belovedness can seem schmaltzy, like some kind of Precious Moments Sunday school cop-out, or just plain naive, as if we live in some kind of self-help fantasy world where accepting yourself and loving yourself fixes everything. We know what "belovedness" evokes. But that feel-good vibe is not what we're talking about here. Belovedness is far more existential, and matters far, far more than how you feel about yourself on any given day.

What we call belovedness, which is understanding your true worth as a child of God, is freedom. Freedom to become fully yourself, surely, but also freedom to become wholly God's. Saints, the heroes of our faith, and sometimes heroes of the world, are nothing other than people who have figured out their own belovedness and have been set free. The saints have discovered what the Apostle Paul figured out, writing back in the first century: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38–39). The saints know, deep within themselves, that the love of God is all that matters, and then they just go for it.

And when they do, the world changes.

Desmond Tutu helped to end apartheid peacefully in South Africa. In America, Fred Rogers changed hundreds of thousands of children's

lives. Dorothy Day started a movement of mercy. Oscar Romero spoke against torture and social injustice. Evelyn Underhill helped stodgy Brits engage with their spirituality, even in the midst of war. Dietrich Bonhoeffer fought Nazis and bore witness to the Beloved Community. In Frances Perkins's quest for labor rights, she became the first woman appointed to the US Cabinet, passing laws against child labor and starting Social Security. And that's just this century. Martyrs, apostles, prophets, preachers, teachers, monastics, mystics, social reformers, doctors, scientists, writers, environmentalists, public servants, historians, scholars, composers, artists, architects, philanthropists, abolitionists, liberators—there are as many ways to be a saint as there are people in the world. What made them saints was their fidelity to who they are and whose they are. The love of God set them free and enabled them to change the world.

These are just the saints whose stories we tell. But there are millions of nameless saints who have come before us, going back to the earliest days of the church and right up until our present day. These saints have been set free by their faith in God to show miraculous amounts of love and to do what is right. From those who fearlessly nursed the plague victims of ancient Rome to the LGBTQ+ community during the AIDS crisis of the 80s and 90s, from those who have smuggled slaves to freedom to those who pluck refugees from the sea today, there have been Christians who have risked everything to love their neighbor, because they have known God's love. Of course, the church and its members have also often done an incredible amount of harm as well. What the life-giving work has in common is love that knows no bounds. What the toxic colonialism and violence has in common is the inability to see that God created and loves all people. Here's the takeaway: how we understand God's love for ourselves and others matters. A lot.

Knowing you are loved sets you free to be yourself and then to use the whole of yourself to participate in God's endeavor in the world. The good news is that you don't have to be a saint of towering compassion like Mother Theresa or a saint of towering genius like Karl Barth. Rather, to be a saint, you just have to be yourself. God made you to be you, because God needs you for who you are, where you are. Even, and maybe

especially, when you're going to college. College is a time for making decisions about who you want to be in the world and how you want to live in the world. This is the time and place where you get to choose. Are you going to choose to live into your belovedness and change the world?

About This Book

This book is an exploration of that question, although perhaps it's easier to first outline what this book is not. This book is not a handbook for how to successfully navigate college, although we hope you do so. This book is not a rulebook that will tell you whether you're doing college correctly or not. This is not a book about "what the Bible says," although we do wrestle with scripture. This book is not a book of sage advice from college chaplains, although generally, chaplains do give great advice. Instead, this book asks a single question that gets refracted through different topics: How would you [fill in the blank] if you knew you were loved beyond all measure? How are you going to choose to live into your belovedness?

We've asked some of our wisest and best chaplain colleagues from a variety of denominational backgrounds to ask that question, as well as help you ask that question for yourself. How would you make choices about your life if you knew you were loved beyond all measure? How would you approach success and failure, your relationships, or prayer? How would you approach being LGBTQ+? Or sex? Or partying? Mental health? How would you navigate life's difficulties if you truly knew how much you were loved? The first chapter explores belovedness, and then the following chapters ask these questions from the perspective of owning your own belovedness while in college. Our hope is that as you read you'll ask these questions for yourself, because the only person who can truly answer the questions we place before you is you.

We also firmly believe that these questions are best asked and answered in community. When we ask these questions in community, we provide each other the love and support that it takes to answer honestly, and by so doing, become who we are. We hope that this book will be used by youth groups getting ready to send their seniors to college

and by college chaplains with first-year college students (or at any point during college). However, we realize that not everyone has access to chaplains, so we've provided a DIY small group guide in the back. Anyone who is willing to help guide a conversation can lead a small group in rich and life-giving conversation. No degree required.

Of course, you can also read the book on your own, but we hope you'll talk about these questions with your friends and adults you trust. Starting in college and moving into young adulthood, how you choose to answer these questions can and will shape the rest of your life. What's tricky about these questions is that if you don't thoughtfully ask them now, life will, whether you've thought about them or not. For instance, you will have to deal with the experience of failure at some point, regardless of whether you've thought about it or not. We hope that by taking the time to reflect faithfully on these questions, you'll be better prepared to answer the questions that life throws at you when the time comes, and to better own your belovedness.

We also hope you'll read sections of the book that may not directly apply to you, like the chapter about being LGBTQ+ or dealing with mental illness. Part of recognizing your own belovedness is recognizing the belovedness of others. We invite you into the questions that may not have direct bearing on your life right now, but probably will for you or the people you love in the future.

Whether you are in college or on your way to college, buckle up. What you choose matters, and who you choose to be, matters. It's about to get real.

BELOVEDNESS

James Franklin

**God looked over everything [God] had made;
it was so good, so very good! (Genesis 1:31, The Message)**

I found myself in the belly of a steel beast. The summer before my junior year, I was sent to the Persian Gulf, where my home was a military transport ship for two months. I was in Navy ROTC and had planned on becoming a helicopter pilot for the Marines. While aboard, a few ROTC students and I had to share bunking space with a platoon of these elite soldiers. The Marines were awaiting the next mission and in that liminal space, they rested, called home to loved ones, exercised incessantly, or played video games until 4:00 a.m. Every. Single. Night. And it was here, in the midst of a crowded berth of hardened scout snipers and Halo, I heard the still small voice calling me “Beloved.”

I should say, in the belly of the beast is where I found myself. Or more accurately, I was awakened to my own belovedness. You see, just a few months prior, my father died suddenly of a heart attack and I was in the midst of a spiraling depression like never before. I was lonely and grieving. I was angry with God. I was angry with the military for sending me so far away from the people I needed most—my family. What were they thinking? “Here’s an angry, lonely, depressed, and confused kid: let’s send him halfway around the world amongst bombs and live ammunition!” I felt a million miles away.

The all-night Halo matches proved to be a welcome distraction from all the grief and loneliness. Sleep meant dreams about my dad and lots of crying (which was an odd thing to do around military folk who are told to “lock it up!”). But it turned out I had more in common with those Marines

than I thought. They themselves were dealing with trauma, grieving the loss of friends or spouses who had left them during deployment. They too were running from all the pain because they had to keep their focus.

One night after a few rounds of Halo with my leather-neck bunkmates, I crawled into my third-story bed. With adrenaline still pumping and general insomnia, I read *Blue Like Jazz*, a memoir by Donald Miller about his college experience and reconciling how a God could be a loving father while his own father had abandoned him.

In the midst of all this, I suddenly had an experience of knowing, from deep within me, that I was beloved. Somehow it made sense that even though my father was gone, his love for me remained. I came to realize that even though it was hard to see God or feel loved by someone who I couldn't see, I was the object of that *agapē* love. I experienced it. I felt it. I knew it.

Some have a dramatic conversion experience. But I wouldn't call my experience dramatic or even a conversion—it was closer to an awakening or waking up, for the first time to my true self. It was the moment I remembered and realized that my transformation was happening slowly, over time, and after being told over and over: you are loved, you are loved, you are loved. This was just the first time it sank in.

In *Life of the Beloved*, Henri Nouwen describes the process of belovedness as claiming for ourselves first, then proclaiming. Nouwen wrote to a student: “From the moment we claim the truth of being the Beloved, we are faced with the call to become who we are. Becoming the Beloved is the great spiritual journey we have to make.”¹ Claiming our own belovedness is a tough process and one that is in direct opposition to the world around us. But it's different than the simplistic (and false) dichotomies of good versus evil, body and soul, or two opposing teams on a field. It doesn't compete for space in the world. It really is more like an awakening. But what does it mean to awaken to this mystical frontier of your innermost being?

Claiming belovedness means letting go. And letting go hurts. Belovedness asks us to let go and submit to a process that grates and chafes

1. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 43.

away at falsehoods, which we've begun to accept as fact, that seek to tell us who we really are. Because the rejection we experience and the constant narrative of unworthiness or how unlovable we are tries to bury our belovedness. The slow awakening to belovedness can be painful as we try to go against the flow of God calling us beloved. Why do we always try to swim upstream when we can flourish in the freedom of floating in a river of grace?

When I first awoke to my belovedness, it hurt. I knew that I was beloved beyond all else and there was nothing anyone could do to change it. But it meant letting go of my ego—that I thought I knew what I wanted to do with my life and the myth that I was in charge of making that life. Yet even in the midst of that agony of letting go, I could feel God holding me in the comfort of my very-goodness, my being made-wholeness, my belovedness.

Another way of speaking about awakening to belovedness is “theophany” (which is just a fancy word for “God showing up” or having an experience of the holy). I can feel and experience belovedness when I'm attuned to that quiet voice that breaks through the cacophony of noise and voices telling me what is important. The harshness of advertisements, pundits, elected officials, and even preachers has divided us and told us to fear the person who doesn't look like us. In college, these voices are multiplied with fears of not living up to parents, school, or our own expectations. Or a voice that seeks perfectionism or is scared to death of failure.

That which keeps us from theophany and belovedness is discordance and fear. Where belovedness unifies and creates belonging, the voices of noise and anxiety divide and drive us to isolation. Fear shouts, “No one will ever love you.” Belovedness speaks, “All are precious to God.” Fear builds a wall; from behind that wall we start to look like an episode of *Hoarders*, clinging to whatever we can. Belovedness creates free and open space for true friendship and community to happen. Fear is a prison of our own making. Belovedness is freedom. And it is knowing that, in spite of all our shit and brokenness, we are loved and we belong.

Awakening is a homecoming to the garden of your Genesis. There you will find the voice calling you “very good.” It rouses a truth that lay

dormant deep down. It is a truth I suspect you've known at some level. Although my own awakening is ongoing, it has taken me thirty years to claim "I am beloved" (even though I suspect I'll never comprehend it). It is pure wonder. It is pure gift. It is mysterious.

Belovedness Began in a Garden

I know who you are.

My guess is, you do too.

Our story of belovedness begins at the beginning with a loving God who says, "Let us make humankind in our image" (Gen. 1:26). God created all there is—including humanity—and called it "very good." God, throughout scripture, chases people with the truth of their original design, which was their "very goodness." God's dream was that you would know it and live from within that truth. Another name for this "very goodness" could be "belovedness," which began long ago in a garden. The Garden of Eden was Jewish allegory and beautiful poetry for telling ourselves and others who we are and how we are supposed to be: we are God's beloved children, created in God's own image. As Julian of Norwich said, we are not just simply created by God but *of* God.² That's right. You're not only created in God's image but you, at your innermost being, are made divine.

Let that settle within you. Have you always been told just how unlovable you are or how you are lower than worm food? If so, belovedness may sound radical. (It is!) Even if you've grown up in a religious tradition (or none at all) that also begins in love, you might need some time for this truth to wash over you as you begin to claim and experience belovedness for yourself.

Why write about belovedness and why does it matter in college? Belovedness is the answer to a question your heart asks. It's the whisper heard from a "still, small voice" (1 Kings 19:12). It's the original blessing that the Word, the Christ, the Son of God, whispered at creation. In

2. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), 129.

college, your hearts ask: “Who am I?” This question is more profound than you may realize, for it is the beginning of your own awakening. In college, while so much is up in the air; while myriad, loud voices tell you who you are and what is important, the small voice whispers, *You are beloved.*

Perhaps it would be better to follow our question of “who am I” with “who am I not?” Often, there is much in the way of beginning to claim or experience belovedness as truth. I’m thinking of the inner voice saying: “No one would love me if they knew the real me.” You are not your grades, the number of likes on your social media, the number of friends you have, the shaming you receive; you are not the guilt you hear from the pulpit. Whether you’ve experienced it explicitly or had it implied, I’m willing to guess you’ve been told, “You are not [fill in the blank] enough,” and “You are not worthy of love.” I call b.s. on that.

I’m saying the opposite: you are worthy of love. You are enough. Just as you are. Full stop. Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor, writer, and theologian says, “You will never become your ideal self. God loves your *actual* self.”³ My brothers, sisters, and nonbinary kin, my straight and LGBTQ+ folks: God did not mess up when God created you. In fact there is nothing wrong with you (as far as how you are made). We all have our issues.

Let’s Talk about Sin ... and Belovedness

In my first year of college, my then girlfriend Nicole abruptly asked me one night before we were about to watch *Pirates of the Caribbean*, “Do you believe people are created inherently good . . . or evil?” Raised going to church and as a preacher’s kid, I knew the story began in God calling things “good” (and not evil) in Genesis. But I also knew about “the fall” and sin. So after a moment, I replied, “Good? I don’t know. Now can we just watch *Pirates*?” She just looked at me and said, “Hmmm.” It was a test. I failed. (Needless to say, our relationship didn’t last much longer.)

3. Nadia Bolz-Weber, round table discussion at Wild Goose Festival, Hot Springs, NC, July 14, 2017.

Being an optimist and a person who was raised hearing about God's love for us, I believed it! But Nicole opened my eyes to the fact that so many of us buy into a narrative that begins outside the Garden, in the wilderness. A narrative that would let us believe that we are first and foremost sinful, depraved, and inherently broken. Nicole brings up a good question: What about sin?

Sin does not define you and it is certainly not the most-true aspect of your being. The most compelling definition of sin I've found is: "The seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation."⁴ I love this definition of sin as "distortion" because it's not just something we do or something wrong with us—it's about the lack of something between us and God and our relationships with the people we meet and how we treat mother earth. Sin exists as a lack of love. In this lacking space, we find belovedness hard to accept and walk the other way from it and from Christ's love. The real sin is in treating others and ourselves as though we're not beloved by God. In walking away, we begin to believe that brokenness is the original design and we, as hurt people, hurt people in return.

In her book *Original Blessing: Putting Sin in Its Rightful Place*, Danielle Shroyer writes that God's first language is blessing and not calling out sin: "Original blessing means realizing your sin is not the most important thing about you, even if the world—or the church—makes you feel like it is."⁵ Countless Christian traditions have exploited original sin and thrived on fear. Sadly, their voices at times seem louder than the still, small voice of belovedness. It makes sense if you think about it: if you start with sin instead of blessing, you end up with a punitive system where God has to be appeased and the death and resurrection of Jesus means salvation is conditional on how you act. Under this system, you can lose that salvation and you can be cast out of the Garden over and over if you don't act right. Not to mention, under this system, war, vio-

4. The Book of Common Prayer, 848.

5. Danielle Shroyer, *Original Blessing: Putting Sin in Its Rightful Place* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress Press, 2016), 24.

lence, and retributive justice are all validated because we're all deprived and only some are "in."

I'm here to say that the narrative of very goodness and belovedness was not broken by sin. We have free will and we can deny our belovedness to the hell we choose. As Jeff, my theologian friend and mentor, says, "We can deny that truth straight to hell. But the truth is still there waiting for us to turn around." But when we begin in blessing and very goodness, we see that our belovedness was there all along and Jesus Christ came to reveal it. In the cross, God's restoration was complete. Our belovedness (which was always there but hard to see) was veiled by death and that distortion of sin. Do you see where I'm going with this? We're not here to call out or name sins. You and I are sick of the voice telling us of all that we are not and all that we will never be because of how we look or where we're from or how we're made. Theologian John Phillip Newell says, "I do not believe that the gospel, which literally means, "Good News" is given to tell us that we have failed or been false. That is not news, and it is not good!"⁶ I'm not concerned with who is in and who is out—that's damaging, heretical, and hurtful. Lord knows we've had enough of that voice.

I want to tell you of another voice. Mark begins his gospel with Jesus appearing at a river to be baptized. When he emerges from the water, a voice is heard saying: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Christ is at the center of this belovedness because Jesus is the Beloved. He grounds this truth and community in the cosmic hope that we know the one who is always whispering to us, "You are beloved." The one who is constantly calling us homeward, the one who is unflinching, unconditionally loving us. The one calling us back to the garden.

When the church was co-opted into empire by Constantine in the fourth century, it moved away from an understanding of Christ as having recapitulated, once and for all, this vision of the very goodness of creation (including you and me) being made beloved once again through the Beloved, Jesus Christ. Instead, it moved toward a notion that you

6. John Phillip Newell, *Christ of the Celts* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 8.

and I are created evil and only the Church (as the gatekeeper to grace and the explainer of scripture) could save you from your sinful nature. This may sound extremely reductionistic of nearly two thousand years of church history. But in fact, it missed the point that Jesus Christ is at the beginning, middle, and end of the story of belovedness. It missed the mark and made knowing God all about religion instead of relationship. How ironic, as God's very nature as Trinity is best described as an eternal dance between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer) in a relationship of love. Don't hear me wrong: religion and the church try, imperfectly, to model this community of love, forgiveness, and grace to the world—the forces that bind the Trinity and us to one another through Christ. Worship in church is still our ideal community of following Jesus. Jean Vanier, the late-theologian and a lifelong Roman Catholic said:

Stop wasting time running after the perfect community. Live your life fully in your community today. Stop seeing the flaws—and thank God there are some! Look rather at your own defects and know that you are forgiven and can, in your turn, forgive others and today enter into the conversion of love.⁷

Church still strives to be this loving community modeling the life of Jesus. Christ came to reveal, forgive, and heal—the Gospel of John says: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (3:17). Paul later understood this as Christ dying “for all; therefore all have died . . . and he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who died and was raised for them” (2 Cor. 5:14–15). Notice it is in past tense: “Died for all.” It is not a conditional death that requires an exchange for our sins—only becoming true if we ask it. We have been spoken for, our lives claimed, and death was defeated once and for all. Paul speaks in past tense not as Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection as happening just one time but as once that carries on for eternity.

7. Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989), 46–47.

Richard Rohr, who might be one of the most important theological voices of our time, writes that if Jesus Christ was limited to one event, namely, the cross, at one point in time, then

the implications of our very selective seeing have been massively destructive for history and humanity. Creation was deemed profane, a pretty accident, a mere backdrop for the real drama of God's concern—which is always and only us. . . . It is impossible to make individuals feel sacred inside of a profane, empty, or accidental universe.⁸

Instead, seeing that Christ was at the beginning when God said, “very good,” means Jesus Christ is in all things—including you. The Gospel of John begins with Genesis language alongside language of Jesus Christ as the “Word”; that is, as the one present at creation and whose being is of God: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him” (John 1:1–3). Rohr writes one of the most beautiful interpretations of the Incarnation: “[I]nstead of saying that God came *into* the world through Jesus, maybe it would be better to say that Jesus came *out of* an already Christ-soaked world.”⁹ In other words, God was never absent because of the fall in the Garden. We were never separated from God. On the contrary, because Christ, the Beloved, was there at the beginning speaking belovedness into all things, Christ emerges through Jesus to reveal our being, made beloved through him. Again, Paul writes in Colossians 3:11: “There is only Christ. He is everything and he is in everything” (paraphrased).

Just as the sun shines on us and our blocking the light creates shadow, so does denying belovedness create the shadow of sin. However, as Danielle Shroyer puts it, “Blessing allows you to look at the brokenness of the world (and within yourself) with grace and loving-kindness, rather than with shame, hostility, or despair.”¹⁰ So when we experience shaming or are

8. Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ* (New York: Convergent Press/Penguin Random House, 2019), 16.

9. *Ibid.*, 15. Emphasis in the original.

10. Shroyer, *Original Blessing*, 24.

told of our unworthiness, we can look within ourselves (and even the person(s) spewing the hate) with grace and through the lens of belovedness. If the sum of your existence was boiled down to one thing, it would be the truth that you and I, everyone in your sociology class, your bedraggled biology professor, your pot-luck first-year roommate, your family, and everyone you know . . . are blessed and beloved. You are made very good. Sin and all.

What We Talk about When We Talk about “Love”

Again, why write about belovedness and why does this matter in college? Because underneath the questions of vocation, relationships, and navigating young adulthood is the question, “Who am I?” I want you to believe wholeheartedly that belovedness is the innermost “I am” of your identity in God. It is the essence of your soul. It is also belonging. Because I am beloved, I belong to God. I belong to something bigger than I could ever comprehend. “Beloved” means there is a lover and an object of that love. God, the Trinity¹¹ (the one described earlier as pure relationship), is bound by eternal love flowing from one to the other. In fact, any time someone asks of God’s name, the response is never a name but instead an attribute, an essence. God says to Moses, “I AM” (Exod. 3:13–15) and later in a whole bunch of places, God is described as: “slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.”¹² The author of the First Letter of John writes: “God is love” (1 John 4:8). But what kind of love are we talking about here? The Greek language (in which the New Testament was written by the early church) has four words for our one English word meaning “love.”¹³ *Storge* love is an empathetic love like the love we have when we see a baby or a golden-doodle. *Philia* love is the love felt between friends or siblings and deeply appreciates the gift of another’s friendship. *Eros* love is the romantic, pleasure, sensual, and sexual

11. Traditionally the Trinity is known as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. See Richard Rohr’s *The Divine Dance* for more.

12. See Exodus 34, Numbers 14, Psalm 86, Psalm 103, and Psalm 130.

13. There are more than four—some say as many as six—different types of love. In *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis focuses on these four: *storge*, *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*.

love of passion. Lastly, *agape* love is the unconditional, charitable, and unchanging love of God for humanity. Belovedness is the *agape* love of God for the object of love—us. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for this love means something like “loving-kindness”—but more on this in chapter 6.

We want to reclaim this *agape* love, this loving-kindness as belovedness, for college students, and we want you to claim it for yourselves. College is the perfect time, developmentally and formationally, to practice this belovedness as a foundation for how you live your life long after you turn the tassel. We think this understanding of ourselves and the world has the power to transform the experience of college into a positive one, filled with joy—even amidst brokenness.

College can be like playing Jenga[®] with my two-year-old daughter: you’ve spent time carefully stacking (or maybe someone stacked them for you) the blocks, which are your beliefs, only to have the tower utterly demolished. What blocks are left standing? Don’t get me wrong, I’m not equating intellectualism or academia with my destructive toddler, but rather that college is naturally a time of deconstruction. In your independence, it’s a time to figure out what you think you know and believe to be true.¹⁴ However, one block will remain no matter how many times you or life tries to kick it over: the block with “*agape*,” “blessed,” “very goodness,” and “belovedness” written all over it. As Paul writes in a prayer for a community he began in Ephesus: “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love” (Eph. 3:17). Christ’s love for you is the grounding when it seems like all we thought was foundational is in ruins. It is here, when identity and vocation seem to be up in the air, belovedness is the voice beckoning us to return home to the one who chases us with love.

When the voice opened up from heaven to say to Jesus, “This is my beloved,” it was the beginning of love coming to dwell with us. You are in

14. Note: I’m not saying “belief and doubt” because, to doubt and wrestle is holy, natural, and transformative. Talk of beliefs is boring. Now is the time to experience for yourself what is most true and good in this world? How will what you find build your moral character?

Christ, therefore you too are called beloved. You too are called to dwell in that love.

Campus Holy Ground

Belovedness is sacramental. (“Sacramental” is just a churchy way of saying “an outward and visible sign of an inward grace,” which also comes from the same word that means “holy” or “set apart.”) If we treat others as though they are already beloved (which they are), then it creates a space of belonging for someone else. It shows as a visible sign of something often invisible. In my church, when someone is baptized, we all profess to “seek and serve Christ in all persons.”¹⁵ I love this part of the baptism because it’s like we are being challenged to see and respect someone else’s belovedness. On campus, it is important to find space that demonstrates *agape* love and belonging.

One of my favorite bible verses (and definitions of who Jesus Christ is) comes from Colossians 1:15. It says Jesus is the visible “image of an invisible God.” In other words, Jesus himself is a sacrament for the world to see and experience the grace and love of the Godhead. Jesus frequently told his followers, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

So for us to become a sacramental space on campus, we have to create community that is a visible sign of grace. We cannot become that place of belonging if we’re telling folks “who is in and who is out.” We cannot become that visible place of grace if we’re excluding another of God’s beloved children. We are not reflecting *agape* love, loving-kindness, original blessing, or belovedness if we’re exiling LGBTQ+ folks, for example.

Beloved, sacramental space is a nonconforming space. It does not judge or evaluate or quantify or perform. Instead, it is a place of vulnerability. It is different and challenges the feel of other spaces on campus. It is set apart—as in, fully engaged with the world around it—yet not conforming to the norms the world says are important. You could even call this space *holy*.

15. The Book of Common Prayer, 305.

It is in this free space that veneers of performance and expectations are broken down and vulnerability allows us to share our stories, our faith, our doubts, our lives. My mentor and boss, Bishop Anne Hodges-Copple, says of college students, “Sometimes it’s not easy to say, ‘Yes, I’m a Christian,’ but if we do, we then say, ‘But please don’t ask me to talk about Jesus.’” This holy space is not a place to compartmentalize your faith or belief in God but instead a place to practice—to go inward. It is a space we can and should wrestle: with God, with scripture in all its messiness and grace, with theology (meaning “God-talk”), and with how it intersects with academia and science. Ideally, we would call this place “church,” but we all know that church is a loaded word and unfortunately many churches create an atmosphere of fear or are egocentric—like a performance rather than a space of worship.

On campus you will need authentic spaces to nurture your soul, make room for healthy skepticism, and wrestle with scripture. After all, wisdom is gained through forgiveness, questioning, practicing love in action, and wrestling with God. To expound upon that earlier saying of Jean Vanier, wisdom and transformation in a Christian campus setting come through *practicing belovedness* as flawed people in an imperfect community. Christian campus community is a school not only of love but of *wisdom* as you experience your holy awakening.

Awakening to Your Inherent Value

One of the greatest stories of belonging, one that is central to understanding the nature of the *agape* love of God, comes straight from Jesus’s mouth. It is the story of awakening through a moment of an epiphany or “coming to your senses.” In Luke chapter 15, Jesus tells three parables of lost things: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and lost people. In this last parable, commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son, this awakening is precisely what happens to the younger son (read: college student) who leaves home, makes bad choices, comes to his senses, and encounters theophany—something unexpected.

John Dominic Crossan says that a parable is a “metaphorical story.” This particular parable is an “example” parable where Jesus likens the

nature of God as cosmic love, acceptance, and forgiveness—all through the simple act of storytelling.¹⁶ The Hebrew name for this type of storytelling is *meshalim* (“wisdom storytelling through parable or proverb of careful comparison to prove a point”). The root word of *meshalim* is *meshal*, meaning “be like.” So in Luke 15:11–32, Jesus reveals much about our need to awaken to the reality of God who “be like” a loving parent.

There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. *But when he came to himself* he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

Did you catch that? The son “comes to his senses.” He remembers. He awakens to the love that was already and always there. He’s sorry and

16. John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parables* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 6–10.

seeks forgiveness (because that is what you do when you hurt people who love you.) One of my favorite theologians, Diogenes Allen, says this passage reveals “that God takes each of us very seriously, far more seriously than we take ourselves. Each of us is so valuable to God that God seeks to find and to welcome us into his glorious kingdom.”¹⁷ He goes further to say that this notion of God loving us would have been radical to people who are accustomed to appeasing angry, egocentric gods. The image of the father running (people didn’t run in those days where running meant hiking up his garment), revealing his man-thighs, would have been ridiculous. The “deeply insulted father who rushes out to welcome his wastrel son . . . introduced something that was utterly new to the entire world. No one had ever taught that every person is of imperishable value.”¹⁸ Prodigal means “extravagant.” At the outset of the parable we see the younger son as extravagant in his magnificent spending of his inheritance/retirement-come-early. But by the end, it is the father’s love and forgiveness that are lavish and abundant. Jewish listeners would have instantly connected this to “loving-kindness” and the “very-goodness” of God’s blessing. Other parables offer glimpses of who God is, but this one (and the other two stories of lost things) reveal that God is not interested in religion or our repentance but desires us in relationship. The God of the cosmos stands on the precipice of the kingdom (which is “very near” to you—as close as a heartbeat) waiting, loving, calling.

Conclusion

This notion of our inherent value to God can be overwhelming. Learning that there is nothing you or I could do that would make God love us less is mind-blowing, heart-in-the-throat news. Because this is the best news. You are precious to God and no one can ever take it from you. So perhaps it’s time to drop the other identities and lean into your beloved-

17. Diogenes Allen, *Theology for a Troubled Believer: An Introduction to Christian Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), xxi.

18. *Ibid.*

ness. I'm thinking of the social identifications and monikers that worked for a while—whether it's Greek life or service club or the premed crowd. Nothing is wrong with these circles, but they do not define you. Your belonging is wrapped up in something much deeper. As Psalm 42:7 says, "Deep calls out to deep." The high school "clique" of belonging kicked the can of identity down the road to college and here you are.

When you show up on campus, you're still a high schooler until some point during your first year when you awaken to the change in your being. The journey for you as a young adult has begun. The frontiers of joy and heartbreak, acceptance and rejection, identity and identity crisis await you. Wherever you are on the spectrum of believing you are beloved, let's just imagine (for the sake of this book) that this is true. It is Truth with a capital "T." Can we agree to accept this basic and yet complicated truth long enough to begin to see how it can shape our actions, how we see people, and how we move through college? It is our hope that you will emerge an integrated and whole person with this same sense of wonder. It is our hope that long after college, you go on to create beloved community wherever you are.

Belovedness can weather suffering, band together for a greater cause, bring happiness to the isolated, and bring wholeness to all. It creates belonging and fulfills our longing and desire for deep connection. When we live from our belovedness, we see the belovedness of others and become the body of Christ.

Going Deeper

Throughout this chapter (in the footnotes), you'll see the books and theologians who influenced my thinking about belovedness. Call me old-fashioned, but I turn to books when I'm searching for answers to questions like, "Who am I?" In addition to the previously cited books, I would recommend the following resources on your journey of awakening to a greater understanding of who you are:

- Donald Miller's *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Thomas Nelson, 2003). A hilarious memoir of coming-of-age-in-college, Miller discovers a new understanding of God's love and what it means to be Christian in college. I read this during my own crisis of faith in college and it had a profound impact.
- Brendan Manning's *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out* (Multnomah, 1990). In this groundbreaking book, Manning tells the story of his own awakening to God's grace. Worth the read!
- No time to read (because, college)? Try these podcasts: Pete Enn's *The Bible for Normal People*; *The Liturgists Podcast*; Rob Bell's *The RobCast*; *Another Name for Every Thing with Richard Rohr*; and *The Bible Binge*.