

Becoming the Beloved

A Sermon Preached for Calvary Baptist Church

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

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Alyssa Alhadeff was 14. In a Facebook post, her mother said Alyssa was a talented soccer player and creative writer with an amazing personality.

Scott Beigel, 35, was a geography teacher and the school's cross-country coach. A student interviewed by Good Morning America said that Beigel saved her life. "He unlocked the door and let us in," she said. "But then I turned around, and he wasn't there."

Martin Duque Anguiano was known as a very funny kid, He was sweet and caring and loved by all his family.

Nicholas Dworet was the team captain of the swim team. Everyone called him "Swim Daddy" for the way he helped his teammates train and practice. He had already received a college scholarship to study physical therapy.

Aaron Feis was the school's assistant football coach who died while shielding students from bullets. "He died the same way he lived -- he put himself second" the team's spokesperson said.

Jamie Guttenberg danced non-stop, sometimes for several hours at a time. "She always looked out for the underdog and the bullied, and she probably had been kind to the student who shot her," a family member said.

Chris Hixon, 49, was the school's athletic director and wrestling coach. "Coach Hixon was a father figure for me," said a senior team member. He was fatally injured after he raced to the scene of the shooting to try to help students.

Luke Hoyer, 15, played basketball and was an NBA fan — and he was quiet but happy, his cousin told *The New York Times*. "I know Luke loved his family. He had a huge heart."

Cara Loughran loved the beach. She adored her cousins. And she was an excellent student, her family said.

Gina Montalto was a member of her school's winter color guard team. One of the team's choreographer's wrote on her Facebook, "We lost a beautiful soul tonight."

Joaquin Oliver moved with his family to the U.S. from Venezuela when he was 3. Friends told the *Times* that he played basketball in a city rec league and loved to write poetry. His nickname was "Guac" because people often mispronounced his first name.

Alaina Petty was an active member of her church who had helped to clean up the Florida Keys

after Hurricane Irma last year. “Her selfless service brought peace and joy to those who had lost everything during the storm,” her family said.

Meadow Pollack was just unbelievable,” her father said. “She was a strong-willed young girl who had everything going for her. Nothing could ever stop her from what she wanted to achieve.”

Helena Ramsay had a relentless motivation towards her academic studies, and her soft warm demeanor brought the best out in all who knew her,” her family said.

Alex Schachter played trombone in the marching band and was proud to have won the state championship last year. His father told the *Times* that he was "a sweetheart of a kid" who "just wanted to do well and make his parents happy."

Carmen Schentrup was a standout student. In September she was [named](#) a National Merit Scholarship semifinalist. Her cousin wrote that she was the smartest 16-year-old he had ever met.

Peter Wang was friends with just about everyone. He was in study hall when the shooting began, and he had been holding a door open so others could escape before him. His family owned a Chinese restaurant and was preparing to celebrate Chinese New Year on Thursday.¹

I have been reflecting this week on what it means to be God’s beloved for the beginning of this new worship series, but all I could think about after Wednesday were the 17 of God’s beloved who were shot and killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida after a student came to campus with a semiautomatic AR-15 rifle.

I spent several hours combing through commentaries and dictionaries at the library trying to find a good definition of beloved. But then I realized that what I was looking for – and perhaps the word we needed today - didn’t come from a book hidden away on the third floor of Moody Library. Instead, pictures and stories of God’s beloved were plastered across every phone, computer, and television screen I saw this week. And what I needed was to take the time to look at their faces, to read their stories, and to weep.

Nothing within me wanted to do this. I didn’t want to see their pictures. I didn’t want to know their names. And I definitely didn’t want to have to say them all aloud to you. The more shootings that happen, the better you and I become at compartmentalizing them – it’s just easier that way. And sometimes we would much rather be numb to the horrific shootings that are happening over and over and over again than to feel their pain each and every time.

¹ Information found from a variety of sources, including: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/02/15/586095587/17-people-died-in-the-parkland-shooting-here-are-their-names> and https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/parkland-school-shooting-victims/?utm_term=.cb5f87b9dd24

So then I thought about maybe sharing just a few of their stories today – there probably wouldn't be time to go through all 17 of them anyway.

But then I came across another story. And another picture. Each one compelling. Each one unique. And then I realized that cutting any of them out would be missing the point entirely, because each one of the 17 is a beloved child of God.

One of today's texts is found in 1 John 3, which tells us, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." And it's true. There's nothing we could do to make God love us any more, and there's nothing we could do to make God love us any less. We are God's beloved – and as 1 John emphatically reminds us, that is what we are. Yet, we're often the worst at believing this about ourselves – much less other people.

This week, I had the chance to attend Waco ISD's Inaugural Female Student Empowerment Summit. It was an incredible event, and I was proud to see several young women at Calvary who were able to participate as well.

The keynote speaker, Dr. Jolanda Jones, shared about her life journey with us. She grew up in the third ward in Houston, and she was often the primary caregiver for her 4 younger siblings while her mother worked. There were times when her family went without water, electricity, or heat. When Jones was a teenager, their rent house burned down from candles they were using in place of electricity. But despite all the odds against her, she went on to become an internationally recognized athlete and later, a lawyer standing up for the marginalized and disenfranchised, a Houston ISD school board member, and community activist.

But of everything she endured throughout her life, Dr. Jones said that what was the most difficult for her to overcome was hearing the awful things her mother said to her growing up. Things like, "I hate you. You're worthless. No one will ever love you. I wish you had never been born." And of all the challenges she had been through in life – the worst by far, she said, was hearing these words from her mother and coming to believe them about herself.

It wasn't until she became an adult that she finally asked her mom, "Why did you say those awful things about me? Why did you have to do that to me?" And her mom said, "I'm so sorry baby – I was so young at the time, and those were the same exact things my momma told me about me. And so I believed them. And without even knowing I was doing it, I passed them along to you."

Because when we believe we are worthless, we will treat others as worthless, too. When we hate ourselves, we will hate others too. When we don't think we are worthy of love, we don't treat others as being worthy of love, either. And if anyone in this room has been told these things – or has come to believe any these things about yourself – hear nothing else I say today but this.

You are a beloved child of God. That is what you are. I want us to take a moment right now and look to the person sitting beside us – in front of us – behind us – and say to them, “You are a beloved child of God.” Look around you and if someone is sitting by themselves, get up and go over to them so that no one goes un-noticed today.

Friends, we are beloved children of God. And when we truly come to believe this about ourselves, I believe we will treat others in this same way, too

But I would also like to add an additional text for us to consider today, and that’s John 11 and the death of Lazarus. Verse 1 of John 11 tells us that a certain man named Lazarus was ill. And Lazarus was beloved. So Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus that said, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.”

Except that when Jesus gets there, it’s too late. Lazarus has been dead for 4 days. Now, those of us who know the rest of the story know that God works to bring new life on the 3rd day. But Jesus arrives on the 4th day, and the 4th day is hopeless. It’s too late. And Mary and Martha are pretty upset with him. They both say to him, “if only you had been here, he would not have died.”

Verse 33 tells us that Jesus is greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved by what has happened. And in verse 35, Jesus begins to weep.

The fact that our God weeps actually brings me great comfort after a week like the one we’ve had. I don’t think I will ever forget the picture of the mother weeping with the Ash Wednesday cross smeared across her forehead from the news this week. And this text reminds us that even when we are completely hopeless, in the Ash Wednesday moments when life truly becomes dust, our God is a God who weeps with us.

But then, Jesus does something completely unexpected. Verse 38 says, “Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed (which is the second time this is mentioned about him) gets up, goes to the tomb, and says “Take away the stone.” Martha looks at him like, “What in the world are you doing? There’s a stench because he’s been dead so long. There’s nothing you can do now. It’s too late. But Jesus goes about his business of bringing about new life, and when he says, “Lazarus, come out” – Lazarus walks out of the tomb.

I love what Pastor Becca Blake at Beacon Church in Philadelphia shared this week in light of this text. She said, “Jesus wept and was greatly disturbed, and then he got to work, raising Lazarus from the dead.” And so there is time for you and me to weep and to be disturbed, but then she says, “there is also holy and important work to be done to lift up life.”

And suddenly, this text reminds me that our weeping over God’s beloved ultimately calls us to action on behalf of God’s beloved.

This Lent we are beginning a new series at Calvary on “Becoming the Beloved.” It’s inspired by the book *Life of the Beloved* by Henri Nouwen – and you’re welcome to follow along if you like, but it’s not required reading.

Lent is often characterized by 40 days of repentance in the life of the church leading up to Easter. Sometimes, Christians give up a habit or practice that they sense distracts or draws them away from Christ during Lent. And other times, we take on a habit or practice that could draw us closer to Christ. And as you and I reflect on our identity as God’s beloved – and as you and I reflect on our neighbors’ identity as God’s beloved, I wonder how that might impact what practices or actions we give up or take on this Lenten season?

After all, as Nouwen writes in his book, “As long as “being the beloved” is little more than a beautiful thought or lofty idea that hangs above my life to keep me from becoming depressed, nothing really changes...[But] Becoming the Beloved is pulling the truth revealed to me from above down into the ordinariness of what I am, in fact, thinking of, talking about, and doing from hour to hour.”²

Friends, if we truly believe that we are beloved by God, what difference does that make? What difference does it make to the critical voices in our head – the ones that we often can’t turn off but seem to narrate our lives hour by hour and sometimes moment by moment? What difference does it make in the way we care for our bodies, our minds, and our souls? What difference does it make in the way we spend our time? What difference does it the ways we show up in the world – in the ways we share of ourselves and our lives with other people?

And what difference does their belovedness make to us? What difference does it make in the ways we treat the people in our classes at school, or the people in the check-out line at HEB? What difference does it make to the people sitting beside us in the pews today – and the people with whom we share life, day in and day out?

And what difference does it make when we turn on the news and hear about, yet another, horrific shooting from another horrific assault rifle that has taken 17 beloved children of God from this world far too soon.

An article in EthicsDaily this week said that “in 2018 alone, there have already been 30 acts of mass gun violence resulting in 58 deaths and 169 injuries, [and we’re not even two months into the year]. The numbers are staggering. And according to the Gun Violence Archive, since 2013, there have been 6,613 incidents involving guns, resulting in 1,834 deaths and 3,161 injuries; 416 of [which] have happened to children younger than 17.”³ With this week’s shooting, three of the 10 deadliest mass shootings in modern US history have come in the last 5 months.⁴

² Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, 45-46

³ <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/to-solve-gun-violence-we-must-love-our-way-forward-cms-24661>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/15/us/florida-shooting.html>

But friends, if we believe that these statistics aren't just numbers to be analyzed – but that they represent names and faces of people who have been created in God's image and who are beloved children of God - then we can't just gloss over their names and faces, can we?

And if we believe that these 17 are beloved children of God, then offering our thoughts and prayers may be an appropriate start to expressing our care and concern, but it's not enough.

Because if we believe that these 17 are beloved children of God, and that what happened in Parkland and Sutherland Springs and Newtown and Las Vegas and Charleston and Orlando and in so many other places and to so many other beloved children of God - then that requires action on our part.

As my friend Alan Sherouse from First Baptist Greensboro, North Carolina wrote this week, "We are all Parkland. Because this is the world. And it's not some scary place far off beyond my reach. It's not some place that imposes something on my children from which I'm otherwise shielding them. It's the place I live. It's within my control. It's a place that I am co-creating. God created a garden, but we have created the world as it is. So this is the world as we have made it. As I have made it."⁵ Christ forgive us. Lord have mercy.

And yes, there is certainly a time for you and me to weep and to be disturbed. Jesus meets us in those spaces.

But, even as we are disturbed, there is also a time for us to partner with Jesus in the holy and important work to lift up life. And my hope and prayer is that our Lenten journey of becoming the beloved will beckon us forward into this kind of work - for and with and on behalf of beloved children of God.

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." May we live into that reality. Amen.

⁵ <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/guest-post/calling-our-children-dust>