

Before Jesus does anything, God loves him. God calls him "Son." God calls him "Beloved." At his baptism, before Jesus endures any temptation or calls any disciples or performs any miracles or teaches any parables or speaks even a word about God's love, God says to him, "Beloved, you are my Son. With you I am well pleased." Not because Jesus has done something to earn God's love. Simply because God loves him, God says to Jesus, "With you I am well pleased."

Dear Sibling in Christ, dear Sister, dear Brother, before you did anything, God loved you. God called you "Child." God called you "Son." God called you "Daughter." God called you "Beloved." At your baptism, for most of you before you learned to walk, before you could sing your ABC's, before you could share your toys or throw a ball or play an instrument, God said to you, "Beloved, you are mine." Before you learned to recite the Lord's Prayer, before you attended Vacation Bible School, before you rang chimes in the Chime Choir, before you served on Altar Guild or taught Sunday School or came to a church workday or invited a neighbor or a co-worker to worship, God said, "With you I am well pleased." Not because you did something to earn God's love. Simply because God loved you, God said to you... and you... and you, "With you I am well pleased."

Have you heard God speaking those words to you, proclaiming your identity as a Child of God in whom God is well-pleased? Have you heard God claim you as God's own Beloved? So many of us have a hard time hearing that voice, that voice that calls us "good," that voice that proclaims our identity as children of God, that voice that claims us as God's beloved, calling out: "With you I am well pleased." Instead, we listen to other voices: the voices that tell us that we're not good enough... the voices that tell us that we are not worthy... the voices that tell us that we're too fat or too skinny or too old or too young or too geeky or too stupid.

My friend Elaine hears such voices. Sometimes she hears her father's voice, telling her that she'll never amount to anything. Sometimes she hears her older sister's voice, telling her that she will surely fail, since she has never succeeded at anything. Sometimes it's her older brother's voice, telling her that she is just plain stupid. And sometimes it's her own voice, telling her that she doesn't deserve anything good that comes into her life. But in therapy Elaine is working on listening to another voice, that of her grandmother, a voice nearly silenced by all those other negative voices, a voice that coos, "You, lovey, you are beautiful, just as you are."

Elaine, of course, is not the only one who needs to learn to listen to a grandmother's loving, life-giving voice. Perhaps you know someone who needs to hear such a voice. Perhaps you, yourself, need to hear it. The Acapella ensemble "Sweet Honey in the Rock" invites you, today, to hear that voice. Dr. Ysaye Barnwell wrote a song for the ensemble titled "No Mirrors in my Nana's House." It's a song about a young girl who sees herself through her grandmother's loving eyes. Listen to the girl's story:

There were no mirrors in my Nana's house, no mirrors in my Nana's house.
There were no mirrors in my Nana's house, no mirrors in my Nana's house.
And the beauty that I saw in everything, the beauty in everything (yeah) was in her eyes...
Was in her eyes.

There were no mirrors in my Nana's house, no mirrors in my Nana's house.
There were no mirrors in my Nana's house, no mirrors in my Nana's house.
And I never knew that my skin was too black. And I never knew that my nose was too flat.
And I never knew that my clothes didn't fit. I never knew there were things that I'd missed,
'cause the beauty in everything (yeah) was in her eyes... was in her eyes.

There were no mirrors in my Nana's house, no mirrors in my Nana's house.
There were no mirrors in my Nana's house, no mirrors in my Nana's house.
And the beauty that I saw in everything, the beauty in everything (yeah) was in her eyes...
Was in her eyes.

The girl in Barnwell's song, a young black girl, develops a sense of self-esteem based not on her shape or her looks or her possessions or what she lacks or how others see her. She sees herself not through a mirror of pride or self-deprecation but, rather, through eyes filled with love and delight and affirmation, not through mirrors of other's judgment, but through her grandmother's eyes.

In our media-obsessed culture, however, there are mirrors everywhere, mirrors that remind us that we are sorely lacking and in need of millions of dollars of improvement. We hear voices that say, "If only you'd get this new I-phone or these new shoes or this brand of jeans, you'd impress your friends... If only you'd use this brand of toothpaste, you'd finally be able to snag that significant other and not have to show up alone at family gatherings... If only you'd had gone into the military like the rest of the family, you'd have made something of yourself..." Over and over and over again, we hear these lies, we see these lies in the mirror of self-deprecation.

What mirrors tempt you, my friend? What voices do you hear, dragging you down to feeling useless, loveless, hopeless? Do you see yourself in a mirror of self-deprecation, or do you see yourself in a grandmother's loving, affirming eyes?

The story of Jesus' baptism reminds us that God—Nana God (or perhaps you prefer Grandma God or Abuela God or Bubba God or Granny God)—Nana God has a house with no mirrors. In God's house, you can't check yourself out in a mirror of self-deprecation. In God's house, there are no voices that tell you that you're not worthy. Instead, Nana God invites you to listen to the only voice that matters, the voice from heaven, the voice that says, "You are my Child, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." In God's house, Nana God invites you to see the beauty that she sees—in you, just as you are—in her eyes.

At the end of Dr. Barnwell's song, after a couple of rounds of "There were no mirrors in my Nana's house," the grandmother speaks for the first time, repeating an invitation, a bit softer each time. She sings, "Chil', look deep into my eyes. Chil', look deep into my eyes. Chil', look deep into my eyes." That's the invitation for you, today, dear friend, an invitation from Nana God: "Look deep into my eyes, my Child—my Daughter, my Son, my Beloved. See yourself, as I see you, just as you are. With you, just as you are," says Nana God, "Chil', I am well pleased." AMEN