

Becoming Beloved
2025 Lenten Book Study
Trinity Presbyterian Church

Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*, New York: Crossroad, 1992; reprint 2000. Study prepared by Ed Wojcicki and John Holsinger, revised by Claire S. Merritt.

Week One (Prologue: A Friendship Begins and Being the Beloved)

“This book is the fruit of a longstanding friendship.” So begins *Life of the Beloved*.

The book is Henri’s attempt to respond to the challenge of a friend. Henri met Fred, a reporter who was Jewish, when he was at Yale Divinity School, and later became acquainted with Fred’s friends as well. Fred challenged Henri to speak to him and his friends so that Henri’s description of spirituality made sense—real sense—in a secularized society. “He was calling me,” Henri writes, “to speak a word of hope to people who no longer came to churches or synagogues and for whom priests and rabbis were no longer the obvious counselors.” “Speak to us about the deepest yearnings of our hearts, about our many wishes, about hope ... Yes, speak to us about something or someone greater than ourselves. Speak to us about God.” So this book reads like a letter that comes from deep within Henri’s heart. You have to wait for the Epilogue to discover Fred’s reaction to what Henri had to say.

Henri says the world is filled with voices that whisper or declare that we are not good enough, not smart enough, and not successful enough. So one of our great temptations is what Henri calls “the trap of self-rejection.” His response, which becomes the theme of this book, is to reject those lies about ourselves and to hear the voice of God telling us over and over, “You are the Beloved.”

Discussion questions – Week 1:

1. In what ways does your life resemble that of Fred and his friends?
2. What criteria do you use to evaluate your value and your success in the different settings of your life: your family, your job, your church, your community?
3. Henri says: “Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection.” When have you fallen into this trap? Why do you think it plays such a large role in our world?
4. Henri says he heard a soft, gentle voice calling him “beloved,” from parents, friends, teachers, students and even strangers. Consider who in your life has been that voice, calling you worthy of love, the beloved. What are your relationships to these people? How is that message expressed?

Week Two (Becoming the Beloved, part I: Taken):

Themes: It is important to learn how to “become the beloved.” That means “letting the truth of our Belovedness become enfleshed in everything we think, say or do.” Being aware of our spirituality is different from psychological awareness. Henri plans to use four words – taken, blessed, broken and given – to explain the movement of the Spirit within us. It is helpful to realize that we are taken, or chosen, by God. To get in touch with your chosenness, (1) remind yourself that the world tells many lies about you, but the truth is “that I am the chosen child of God;” (2) keep looking for the people and places where your truth is spoken, and spend time with those people and in those places; and (3) be grateful for your chosenness.

Discussion questions – Week 2:

1. What does Henri mean by the word “chosen”? How does his meaning differ from our everyday use of this word?
2. How can we unmask the lies that the world constantly tells about us? Why is it so easy to believe these lies in the first place?
3. Identify a specific person “who speaks your truth”: that you are worthy of love and in fact are the beloved. Identify a specific place where that truth is spoken. How do you feel when you think about these people and places? If you cannot name anyone or any place now, can you name someone or some place from the past? Can you go back there?
4. How do you practice gratitude in your life? Why is it so important to be grateful?
5. How does awareness of our chosenness affect how we relate to others?

Week Three (Becoming the Beloved, part II: Blessed):

Themes: People need blessings from others. A blessing is similar to affirmation. “To give a blessing is to affirm, to say yes to a person’s Belovedness.” With the problems that both we and the world have, it is sometimes as easy to feel cursed as it is to feel blessed. Yet, the blessing speaks truth and the curse speaks lies. There are two ways to claim our blessing: prayer and the “cultivation of presence” – that is, to be more and more focused on the small blessings that come our way in the present moment, in the routine of life. The work of prayer is a hard discipline, though, because it requires us “to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me.”

Discussion questions – Week 3:

1. Henri states: “To give someone a blessing is the most significant affirmation we can offer.” How does a blessing differ from a compliment? Share an example of a blessing you have given to someone or a blessing you have received.

2. If it is so powerful to give a blessing to another and to feel the blessing from another, why don't we do it more often?
3. According to Henri "the real 'work' of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me." Why is silence so difficult for Henri and for us? If you have used a sacred text as a part of praying how has it helped you?
4. Why do prayer and "cultivating presence" seem so difficult to implement in our daily lives? What can you do to overcome this difficulty?

Week Four (Becoming the Beloved, part III: Broken):

Themes: Nouwen uses the word "broken" very personally and powerfully. We don't often talk of ourselves as broken. We might say we are not perfect, or that everybody has problems. True enough, but as Nouwen puts it, "All the people we know or know about are broken." And, "[o]ur brokenness is always lived and experienced as highly personal, intimate and unique." Perhaps surprisingly, Nouwen says the first response to our brokenness should be to befriend it. Our culture teaches us to avoid pain or deny it – and to get rid of it quickly. But Nouwen, who suffered from depression and went to treatment for it, writes that facing pain is the first step through it. He also says it is healthy to put your brokenness "under the light of the blessing." By that he means to keep listening for the Voice that calls you Beloved. If you do that, your pain and brokenness slowly will be transformed and will become a source of communion and hope, even in the midst of suffering.

Discussion questions – Week 4:

1. It might be difficult to share the pain of brokenness, even in a group of friends. It seems so personal, perhaps too personal to share. Yet in what ways can sharing our brokenness deepen relationships and make pain easier to bear?
2. How do you respond to suffering? Do you wallow in it? Do you try to run away from it? Do you blame yourself, others, God? What do you think it means to befriend your brokenness?
3. Henri states: "The great spiritual call of the Beloved Children of God is to pull their brokenness away from the shadow of the curse and put it under the light of the blessing. How does putting our brokenness under the blessing differ from putting it under the curse? Why do we find it so difficult to do this?"
4. Think of a time of great suffering in your life. What helped you get through this experience? How were you changed by it?

Week Five (Becoming the Beloved, part IV: Given):

Themes: True joy and happiness come from giving to others. But "the real question is not "What can we offer to each other?" but "Who can we be for each other?" Our true gifts are

not so much our talents as who we are: “friendship, kindness, patience, joy, peace, forgiveness, gentleness, love, hope, trust, and many others.” We are called to live in such a way that not only our life but also our death is a gift.

Discussion questions – Week 5:

1. What is it about giving of yourself that is especially satisfying?
2. How does the concept of being given help us integrate the other concepts of being chosen, blessed and broken into our lives?
3. Why is it not enough to rely on our talents when we give to others?
4. How do you understand Henri’s statement: “Not only are we called to live for others, but also to die for others?” Can you describe any experiences in which someone else’s death contained a great gift to you?

Week Six (Living as the Beloved and Epilogue: A Friendship Deepens):

Themes: The truth is that the world is not our source of life. Instead, life is an opportunity to say “Yes” to the truth of our belovedness and to say “Yes” to the One who calls us Beloved. Both joy and suffering become our way to spiritual fulfillment. The Spirit of God calls us to wholeness, to a life in which “divisions vanish and inner as well as outer unity manifests itself.”

Discussion questions – Week 6:

1. Henri says: “I believe deeply that all the good things our world has to offer are yours to enjoy. But you can enjoy them truly only when you can acknowledge them as affirmations of the truth that you are the Beloved of God.” Do you agree with this statement? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Henri describes God as “a Lover who wants to be loved.” How can our life become an expression of our love for God?
3. Our secular world is one of divisions and opposites. How can the spiritual life that Henri describes overcome these divisions and create “one unified reality?”
4. How does Henri envision eternal life? In light of his understanding, why is death no longer a defeat? How do Henri’s views fit into your beliefs concerning life after death?

Epilogue: A Friendship Deepens: After finishing this manuscript, Henri sent a copy to his friend Fred, who then went to Toronto to talk to Henri about it. Although the response by Fred and his secular friends was not what Henri had hoped for, the manuscript was received favorably by a group of searching Christians and thus became “The Life of the Beloved.” According to Henri, in our secular world “the issue is whether there is anything in our world that we can call ‘sacred.’”

1. What is sacred for you and how do you nurture your experience of the sacred?

2. Fred asks: “Do I really need God to live, to be happy, to enjoy life, to fulfill my deepest desires? Do I need faith to live a decent and creative life?” How do you answer these questions for yourself?
3. Although Henri’s manuscript did not have the desired effect on Fred, it did help others. In what ways has it helped you? Have you had an experience that was a failure in one respect but an unexpected success in another?