Life of the Beloved
Spiritual Living in a Secular World

A Lenten Guide
• To use as a companion to reading Life of the Beloved
• To use as a family devotional guide
• To reflect on your daily living as a disciple of Christ
“Who are you?” is the most basic human question that returns to our consciousness throughout our lifetime.

Whether we are in the midst of adolescent angst or transitions in family or jobs, there are times along our journey when we pause and assess, “Who am I?” One of the newer catechisms of our denomination, Belonging to God: A First Catechism, poses this as their first question, “Who are you?” with a resounding response, “I am a child of God.”

Each year the liturgical season of Lent invites us to pause and reflect on who we are and on our relationship with Christ. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, this year on March 6th, and ends Maundy Thursday, on April 18th. The ensuing forty days are intended to be a time of intentional contemplation on what it means to follow the One who traveled from Nazareth to Jerusalem, from the manger to the empty tomb on our behalf...what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Baptism is our “ordination” or commissioning into a life of discipleship. While it is neither the moment we become children of God nor the occasion of our salvation, it is the inauguration into our Christian life and our common call to discipleship. In baptism God calls us by name and we are marked as Christ’s own. The vows taken in this sacrament are a commitment to living in ways that say “thank you” for the extravagant love and unfailing grace given to us through our Lord and Savior. We did nothing to deserve and we can do nothing to earn it. Therefore, our lives are a grateful response to this unmerited gift. This sacrament of water and Spirit is not simply a one-time event - it is a lifetime journey of living into our baptism and growing in our life of Christian faith.

The Gospels tell of Jesus’ own baptism. The key phrase included in all four Gospels is the voice from the heavens saying, “This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” Every baptism is an opportunity to listen for those words spoken to the child, the parents and you, over and over again. “You are my child, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” What if the answer to the question “Who are you?” is “You are God’s beloved.” How might that change how you understand yourself? How you live your life?
The Christian Formation team invites the faith community – children, youth and adults – of First Presbyterian Church to join in a common reading and reflection as we seek to deepen our understanding of who we are and what it means to live as one who belongs to and is loved by God. Our guide for the next six weeks will be Henri Nouwen and his book. Nouwen is a cherished spiritual mentor and prolific author who left the ivory towers of Yale and Harvard to live out his faith with the “least of these.” In his book he asks the central question, “What if we truly believed we were God’s beloved?”, then beckons us on a journey to consider what it means to live a Life of the Beloved.

Easier said than done. We cannot command ourselves into believing we are the Beloved or spontaneously reorient our lives. However, we can practice our way into Christian identity. Our theology teaches about “Means of Grace” – particular practices we can participate in where grace is mediated and faith is formed. There are thirteen practices, some of which you are already doing, that deepen our discipleship. Rather than “giving something up” this year during Lent, in hopes that the craving will help you remember Christ, we encourage you to “take on” one of these “Means of Grace” as a way to deepen your relationship with Christ and strengthen your belief that you are, indeed, God’s beloved.

Whether you have time to read the book on your own, join in one of the weekly studies or simply read this companion booklet (or all of the above!), this Lenten season add one of the “Means of Grace” you are not currently practicing and watch for the ways God continues to form your faith.
Means of Grace

1. Worshipping God together - praising God, giving thanks for God's creative and redemptive work in the world, hearing God's word preached, and receiving the sacraments given to us in Christ.

2. Telling the Christian story to one another – reading and hearing the Scriptures and also the stories of the church's experience throughout its history.

3. Interpreting together the Scriptures and the history of the church's experience, particularly in relation to their meaning for our own lives in the world.

4. Praying – together and by ourselves, not only in formal services of worship but in all time and all places.

5. Confessing our sin to one another, and forgiving and becoming reconciled with one another.

6. Tolerating one another’s failures and encouraging one another in the work each must do and the vocation each must live.

7. Carrying out specific faithful acts of service and witness together.

8. Suffering with and for one another and all whom Jesus showed us to be our neighbors.

9. Providing hospitality and care, not only to one another but to strangers and even enemies.

10. Listening and talking attentively to one another about our particular experiences of life.

11. Struggling together to become conscious of and to understand the nature of the context in which we live.

12. Criticizing and resisting all those powers and patterns (both within the church and in the world as a whole) that destroy human beings, corrode human community, and injure God’s creation.

13. Working together to maintain and create social structures and institutions that will sustain life in the world in ways that accord with God's will.
Outreach Opportunities

At the corner of Trade and Church streets, disciples at First Presbyterian Church have many opportunities to live out the Means of Grace as we serve our neighbors in the heart of Charlotte. First Presbyterian is a hands-on partner for multiple agencies and initiatives that fight homelessness, poverty and hunger. Contact Mary Scott Peterson (mpeterson@firstpres-charlotte.org) to learn more. If you are interested in creating better education and economic opportunities for children in West Charlotte through our partnership with Westerly Hills Academy, contact Heather Herring (hherring@firstpres-charlotte.org).

Some of the ways we share our gifts of time, talent and resources include:

**One-Time Outreach Opportunities:**
- A Child’s Place
- Charlotte Rescue Mission
- Crisis Assistance Ministry
- Habitat for Humanity
- Loaves and Fishes
- Men’s Shelter of Charlotte
- Moving Ministry
- Room in the Inn
- YWCA Women in Transition

**Monthly Outreach Opportunities:**
- Charlotte Rescue Mission
- Crisis Assistance Moving Ministry
- Lakewood Preschool
- Loaves and Fishes
- Sandwich Kitchen
- Urban Ministry Center
- Westerly Hills Academy (Tutoring, Project Backpack Weekend, Meal Bags, Afterschool Enrichment)

Lent 2019: Life of the Beloved
LENT I: Being the Beloved
(pages 11-39 of the book)

What is a spiritual life? How would we benefit from it, and how would we go about cultivating it? The truth is, that this life and all its fruits are already present. The task is to claim the Belovedness that is ours from the beginning of time. What stands in the way of living a spiritual life?

The voice that calls us “Beloved” speaks from above and from within. “Being Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence” (p.33), but it’s not easy to hear in a world filled with voices that shout, “You are no good, you are ugly, you are worthless....” “These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them” (p. 31) and to fall into the trap of self-rejection that contradicts the voice that calls us the “Beloved”.

The trap often involves fruitlessly looking for someone or something who can convince us of our Belovedness. Instead of listening to the voice that speaks from within, we listen to those who call us to do something spectacular to earn the love we desire. Then we worry if those voices really love us as we are.

As long as we are waiting for affirmation from the world, we will never be fully satisfied. Yet, there is one who says, “I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved...” (p. 36) We are invited to embrace that calling and shape our lives in the knowledge that we belong to the Belover.
Personal

• **Journal:** “The greatest gift my friendship can give to you is the gift of your Belovedness,” Nouwen wrote to his friend Fred Bratman. “I can give that gift only insofar as I have claimed it for myself.” Journal about what it means to be the “Beloved.” What is your Belovedness? Once you claim your Belovedness, how do you share that with others?

• **Read:** *Means of Grace #2* Telling the Christian story to one another – reading and hearing the scriptures and also the stories of the church’s experience throughout history. How will you tell the Christian story to someone this week? Reread the scripture passages from this past Sunday. How is Belovedness portrayed in the readings?

• **Think about:** Write a sentence about your Belovedness on a notecard or sticky note. Then do the same for someone else.

Communal

• **Journal:** Henri Nouwen reminds us that we are chosen by God to be God’s beloved children. Take a moment to make a list on your journal page of people, places, and things that remind you that you are loved by God.

• **Read:** *Means of Grace #2* (p. 4) aloud. How does reading and hearing scripture remind you that you are beloved by God? Share this with one another.

• **Talk about:** What First Presbyterian Church programs/ministries help people know they are loved by God. How can you participate in/support one of these?
LENT I - Prayer by St. Thomas Aquinas

Grant me, O Lord my God,
a mind to know you,
a heart to seek you,
wisdom to find you,
conduct pleasing to you,
faithful perseverance in waiting for you,
and a hope of finally embracing you.
Amen.
LENT II: Becoming the Beloved: Taken
(pages 41-66 of the book)

Becoming the Beloved is putting the knowledge of Belovedness into the ordinariness of our lives and embodying it in everything we think, say or do. But how does this work? How does our Belovedness influence our daily lives?

Nouwen begins by reminding us that we have to know and accept that we are “taken”. “...As Beloved, we are God’s chosen ones... seen by God from all eternity... as unique, special, precious beings.” (p. 53) To be chosen as the Beloved of God is a compassionate, not a competitive choice. “Instead of excluding others, it includes others...” (p. 55)

Dare to claim it. “When we lose touch with our chosenness, we expose ourselves to the temptation of self-rejection and that temptation undermines the possibility of ever growing as the Beloved.” (p. 56) How do we get in touch with our chosenness when we are surrounded by rejections? Here are some suggestions:

“...Keep unmasking the world for what it is: manipulative, controlling, power-hungry and... destructive.” (p. 59) It does not love as God loves.

“...Keep looking for people and places where our truth is spoken and where we are reminded of our deepest identity as the chosen one.” (p. 59)

“Celebrate our chosenness constantly.... Gratitude is the most fruitful way of deepening our consciousness that we are... a divine choice” (p. 60)

“Being chosen is the basis for being the Beloved. It is a lifelong struggle to claim that chosenness, but also a lifelong joy.” (p. 66)
Personal

• **Journal:** Identify a specific person “who speaks your truth”: that you are worthy of love and reminds you of your deepest identity as a chosen one. Identify a place where that truth is spoken. Journal about this specific person or place. How do you feel when you think about these people and places?

• **Read:** *Means of Grace #1* Worshiping God together – praising God, giving thanks for God’s creative and redemptive work in the world, hearing God’s word preached, and receiving the sacraments given to us in Christ. How can you practice gratitude and God’s redemptive work in your life this week? How can you worship God with gratitude this week?

• **Think about:** Write a note of gratitude to a specific person who has demonstrated that you are beloved by them.

Communal

• **Journal:** In chapter 2, Nouwen points out that when we really believe we are beloved, we behave as people loved by God. On your journal page describe what behaving/acting like someone loved by God looks like to you.

• **Read:** *Means of Grace #1* (p. 4) aloud. Part of living as God's beloved includes participating in the sacraments. What do you remember or know of your baptism?

• **Talk about:** At every baptism we make promises as a congregation to raise that person to be a disciple. How are you doing this at First Presbyterian Church?
LENT II - Prayer by St. Augustine

Breathe in me, O Holy Spirit,
That my thoughts may all be holy.
Act in me, O Holy Spirit,
That my work, too, may be holy.
Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit,
That I love but what is holy.
Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit,
To defend all that is holy.
Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit,
That I always may be holy.
LENT III: Becoming the Beloved: Blessed  
(pages 67-83 of the book)

We fearful, anxious, insecure human beings are in need of a blessing. Perhaps that is why #blessed has become such an over-used, innocuous word. Nouwen defines “blessing” as “saying good things of someone.” (p. 68) not to appease egos, but “to affirm, to say ‘yes’ to a person’s Belovedness... and [to touch] the original goodness of the other....” (p. 69)

But it’s often more our tendency “to believe that we are cursed than that we are blessed” (p. 75) “We easily hear an inner voice calling us evil, bad, rotten, worthless, useless, doomed....” “[These curses] are lies.” (pp. 74-75)

Just like our Belovedness, our blessedness is “a truth that shapes our daily lives”, (p. 75) and we must be able to see and experience it. How?

Prayer - As a way to hear to the blessing, “...become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about [us].” (pp. 75-76).

Presence - Be attentive to the blessings that come to us daily. “We are too busy... to notice that we are being blessed.” (p. 79) “[Blessings] are surrounding us on all sides. But we have to be present to them and receive them.” (p. 81)

“There is little or no neutral territory between the land of the blessed and land of the cursed. You have to choose where it is that you want to live, and that choice is one that you have to keep making from moment to moment.” (p. 82)
Personal

- **Journal:** “To give someone a blessing is the most significant affirmation we can offer,” Nouwen wrote. “To give a blessing is to affirm, to say ‘yes’ to a person’s Belovedness.” Outside of church – in the secular world – how can we give someone a blessing. Journal about a blessing, particularly a prayer or presence, you’ve given or received, or one you would like to give or receive. How did this blessing say “yes” to someone’s Belovedness?

- **Read:** *Means of Grace #10 Listening and talking attentively to one another about our particular experiences in life.* How does it feel when someone is present for you? For whom can you be present this week?

- **Think about:** Nouwen tells his friend to try sitting for an hour in silence to listen for the “voice that dwells deep in your heart.” Set a timer for at least five minutes and try this spiritual practice. Did you hear the voice Nouwen speaks of? How did you feel afterward?

Communal

- **Journal:** Nouwen recognizes that the both blessings and curses come from words said about us. On your journal pages make two columns. In one write words that curse and tear down others. In the second write words that affirm and build up others.

- **Read:** *Means of Grace #10* (p. 4) aloud. Our spoken words are important and so is our willingness to listen to other speak. Who is the last person you listened to share a story about their day or from their life?

- **Talk about:** Name someone you know you will see this week that you can both listen to and affirm.
LENT III - Prayer by St Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.
LENT IV: Becoming The Beloved: Broken  
(pages 84-103 of the book)

Brokenness is a way of life that manifests in our frustrations, insecurities, pain, feelings of failure and of rejection. Though poverty, homelessness and disabilities are real, what we experience most often and most deeply is the inner “suffering of the broken heart.” (p. 89)

We are fragmented in a way that creates physical and emotional distance between ourselves and others. We stay busy so that we are rarely present in relationships. We live stressed and tense so that we seldom experience the feeling of Belovedness. How can we respond to this brokenness? Nouwen offers two suggestions:

“Befriend it.” (p. 92) “...the first step to healing is not a step away from the pain, but a step toward it.... Become familiar with it”, (p. 93) and “...trust that [we] have the strength to stand in it.” (p. 95)

“Put it under the blessing.”(p. 92) “Living our brokenness under the curse [instead of blessing] means that we experience our pain as a confirmation of our negative feelings about ourselves.” (p. 96) The great task is to “pull [the] brokenness away from the shadow of the curse and put it under the light of the blessing.” (p. 97)

Befriending and putting our brokenness under the blessing “do not necessarily make our pain less painful, In fact, [they] often [make] us more aware of how deep the wounds are and how unrealistic it is to expect them to vanish.” (p. 100) However, they help us to see our lives in the light of being blessed instead of in the darkness of being cursed.
Personal

- **Journal:** Think about a time of great suffering in your life. Journal about this specific brokenness time in your life. What helped you get through this experience? How were you changed by it?

- **Read:** *Means of Grace #5 Confessing our sin to one another and forgiving and becoming reconciled to one another.* This past Sunday during worship as you read the prayer of confession with your church community, what words or lines stood out to you?

- **Think about:** This Sunday during worship, as you read the prayer of confession, listen for what we are confessing as a church community, our world and individually. What speaks to your daily living the Christian life?

Communal

- **Journal:** Sometimes we hurt/wound others and sometimes they hurt/wound us. Nouwen says that as a result we are all broken. On your journal page describe something that hurt you this week. Then write a few words that describe how that felt.

- **Read:** *Means of Grace #5* (p. 4) aloud. How does naming what we have done and asking for forgiveness help us not to repeat our hurtful actions?

- **Talk about:** When we hurt others and cause brokenness it is our responsibility to admit/confess what we did and to ask for forgiveness. Say a short prayer of confession for someone you have hurt recently.

Lent 2019: Life of the Beloved
LENT IV - Prayer by Thomas Merton

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that
I think I am following Your will does not mean that I am
actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that, if I do this, You will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust You always though I may seem to be lost
and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for You are ever with me,
and You will never leave me to face my perils alone.
LENT V: Becoming The Beloved: Given
(pages 105-125 of the book)

“We are chosen, blessed and broken so as to be given.... In giving it
becomes clear that we are chosen, blessed, and broken not simply for our
own sakes, but so that all we live finds its final significance in its being
lived for others.” (p. 105) The result is “true joy, happiness, and inner
peace.” (p. 109)

By living into the means of grace listed at the front of this booklet, we give
of ourselves and experience our Belovedness in a real and embodied way
from birth (the incarnation of Belovedness) to death (“the gateway to the
complete experience of being the Beloved” (p. 116))

How do we go about living day-to-day as “bread” for others?

Give ourselves to one another. “The real questions is not ‘What can
we give each other?’, but ‘Who can we be for each other?’” (p. 113)

Give ourselves in life and in death. “[We] have to trust that our
short little lives can bear fruit far beyond the boundaries of our
chronologies. But we have to choose this and trust deeply that we
have a spirit to send that will bring joy, peace, and life to those who
will remember us.” (p. 120)

“How different would our life be were we truly able to trust that it
multiplied in being given away! How different... if we could but believe
that every little act of faithfulness,... gesture of love...word of forgiveness,..
little bit of joy and peace will multiply... as long as there are people to
receive it...” (p.123)
Personal
• Journal: “The real question is not ‘What can we give each other?’” Nouwen wrote, “but ‘Who can we be for each other.’” Gift-giving often makes us feel warm, whether it’s a holiday, a birthday or an anniversary, but does that feeling change when you focus on the recipient? Journal about why gift-giving makes you feel this way. Why is it enjoyable? Who can you be for someone else?

• Read: Means of Grace #8 Suffering with and for each other and all whom Jesus showed us to be our neighbors. What is the difference between suffering with and for someone as opposed to listening and feeling sorry or pity for that person? Whom did Jesus reveal to us as our neighbors? Is it possible to suffer with all of our neighbors?

• Think about: The next time someone tells you about a problem – even a small one – try to empathize rather than sympathize with them. Tinyurl.com/empathyFPC

Communal
• Journal: Nouwen describes giving ourselves to each other as offering each other friendship, kindness, patience, joy, peace, gentleness, love, hope…. Draw one of these words on your journal page. Around it write the names of people who have given this to you.

• Read: Means of Grace #8 (p. 4) aloud. Sometimes we are able to give the above gifts to others. Why is this especially important when some one is suffering, sad, or hurt?

• Talk about: Who around you at work, church, or school needs one of the gifts above? Which gift is it? How can you share it with them this week or month?
LENT V - Prayer by Teresa of Avila

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.
LENT VI: Living as the Beloved
(pages 129-139 of the book)

The life of the Beloved is lived in a fast-paced world that challenges the deep inner joy and peace that is available to us. Even as we’ve claimed our Belovedness, we build careers, hope for success and seek stimulation and excitement. Are these aspirations incompatible with the spiritual life? No, “the world is evil only when you become its slave.” (p. 130)

“The great struggle... is not to leave the world, to reject ambitions... or to despise money, prestige, or success, but to claim [our] spiritual truth and to live in the world as [people] who [don't] belong to it.... All good things our world has to offer are [ours] to enjoy. But [we] can enjoy them truly only when [we] can acknowledge them as affirmations of the truth that [we] are the Beloved of God” (pp. 130-131)

If [we] really want to live in the world, [we] cannot look to the world itself as the source of the life. The world and its strategies may help [us] to survive... but they can not help [us] live.” (p. 132)

How might our sense of purpose be shaped if we thought of ourselves as having been sent to the world? Our presence among people searching for more than survival would “allow them to catch a glimpse of the real life.” (p. 132) Might we live life as an unceasing affirmation of Belovedness? “That is the spiritual life: the chance to say ‘Yes’ to our inner truth.” (p. 133)
Personal

• **Journal:** Henri Nouwen says, If you really want to live in the world, you cannot look to the world itself as the source of the life. The world and its strategies may help you to survive... but they cannot help you live.” Journal about what messages are you hearing in your secular world that you are not beloved?

• **Read:** *Means of Grace #7 Carrying out specific faithful acts of service and witness together.* What are you doing to witness to other that you are beloved and they are beloved?

• **Think about:** How can you demonstrate Christ’s unconditional love to someone in your church, family, community that they are a beloved child of God?

Communal

• **Journal:** Only once we believe that we are God’s beloved children can we really enjoy all that God had given us in this world. When this is our starting point we don’t need the world to praise us, we are secure in God’s love. On your journal page describe what it means to you to be God’s Beloved.

• **Read:** *Means of Grace #7* (p. 4) aloud. As God’s beloved we can go confidently into the world, into our day to share this love with others and to affirm those who tell of &/or show God’s love. Who do you see doing this at First Presbyterian Church?

• **Talk about:** Write a note/email/card/text to this person, thanking them for their offering God’s love in this ministry.

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Lent 2019: Life of the Beloved
LENT VI - Prayer by J. Philip Newell

I seek your presence, O God, not because I have managed to see clearly or been true in all things this day, not because I have succeeded in loving or in reverencing those around me, but because I want to see with clarity, because I long to be true and desire to love as I have been loved. Renew my inner sight, make fresh my longings to be true and grant me the grace of loving this night that I may end the day as I had hoped to live it, that I may end this day restored to my deepest yearnings, that I may end this day as I intend to live tomorrow.
Epilogue
(pages 141-149 of the book)

“I had sounded like someone who is so excited about the art of sailing that he forgets that his listeners have never seen lakes or the sea, not to mention sailboats!” Nouwen wrote about Fred’s reaction to Life of the Beloved. If you didn’t, consider reading the epilogue. Then think about, journal and/or discuss the following questions.

1. Were you surprised Nouwen’s friend didn’t feel a connection with Life of the Beloved?


3. “Maybe the great challenge is to trust so much in God’s love that I don’t have to be afraid to enter fully into the secular world and speak there about faith, hope and love,” Nouwen wrote. “Maybe the place where the gap has to be bridged is within me?” How well does the Church reach out to those who live in a truly secular world? How well does First Presbyterian Church do this? What are ways that the Church (and our church) extend itself to those living secularly?