



**St. Anne's Episcopal Parish
Church Circle • Annapolis, MD • 21401**

**Parish Offices & Education Building
Location at 199 Duke of Gloucester St.
Annapolis, MD 21401**

**Phone : 410-267-9333
Fax 410-280-3181
www.stannes-annapolis.org**

God's Love

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on
The First Sunday After the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord
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The Church in the Circle
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

The poet Maya Angelou once wrote about how God's love for us can change our lives. She writes: "God loves me. Each time I allow myself to say these words I am suffused with tears of gratitude and wonder. And I am reestablished as a giving, living, full human being with every right to everything right here on this earth." In an interview with David Frost, Angelou explained the impact this statement, this truth, has had on her. She said, "The idea that this creation, [this] creator, loves me, me -- not me generically, but me, Maya Angelou -- is almost more than I can comprehend. It fills me. It enters and makes me inflate like a balloon. [It is] really the most amazing thing. I can't know it too frequently. I can't know it completely. My heart might burst. My veins might boil up. My eyes would pop out. My navel would thump. My feet would grow about six inches on either side. Really it has a physiological impact on me."

I suppose, we should allow Angelou a little poetic license. But she is trying to express the inexpressible. She is pointing us to the potentially life-changing impact that the truth of God's love for us can have when we really know it, when we really experience that love in the core of our being. As Angelou says, "Each time I allow myself to say the words [God loves me] I am suffused with tears of gratitude and wonder. And I am reestablished as a giving, living, full human being with every right to everything right here on this earth." If she knew this truth completely, she says, her heart might burst, her veins might boil up, her eyes might pop out.

God loves us. It is powerful stuff. If people really believed that, who knows what would happen. And yet, every time we gather together as a Christian community, that is essentially the message we proclaim. I love the statement by Annie Dillard, who says that if Christians had the foggiest idea of the power they were invoking every Sunday they wouldn't "wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."

But that's what we do week in and week out. Proclaim the unconditional, eternal love of God for each and every one of us. The theologian Ernesto Cardenal puts it this way, "Like a

lover who spends all his time thinking of his distant love, God has been thinking of me since before I was born, for all eternity. God loves us more than we love ourselves.” Archbishop Desmond Tutu says, “God loves us. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more and nothing we can do to make God love us less. Our adoption is forever. We are all God's children.” The great cellist Pablo Casals once expressed this truth this way. He said, “We should say to [people]: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all the years that have passed, there has never been another like you. Your legs, your arms, your clever fingers, the way you move. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel.”

God loves us. God loves us more than we love ourselves. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more and nothing we can do to make God love us less. If we knew this truth completely our hearts might burst. Each and every one of you is a marvel. Uniquely loved by God for all eternity. Imagine the power this might have if we really knew it in the core of our being.

Our Gospel lesson for today is a story about the life-changing power of God's love. It is the story of the baptism of our Lord. Matthew writes, “Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him . . . and just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were open to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased.’” The voice of God says, “This is my Son, the Beloved” and the heavens themselves are torn apart. The voice of God says, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased” and the Spirit of God descends like a dove.

I wonder what it would be like to hear the voice of God declare to you . . . not to you generically . . . but to you specifically . . . that *you are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter, with you I am well pleased?* As Maya Angelou suggests, this statement of God's love for us might fill us up. It might enter us and inflate us like a balloon. Our hearts might burst, our veins might boil up, our eyes might pop out. What would it be like to really hear, to really know, the truth that you are the beloved sons and daughters of God?

For Jesus, it was like the heavens were torn apart and like the Spirit descending upon him like a dove. It was life changing. Before he begins his public ministry, before he does anything or says anything, Christ's identity and mission were formed by this experience of God's love. Everything he would go on to say and everything he would go on to do was grounded in this love. And, notice, it is specific. It is the love of God that says, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased.” When we think of the life-giving power of Christ's ministry, I think we should remember that it was founded upon this deep, intimate, abiding sense that he was God's beloved Son, with whom God was well pleased. He knew this love completely and it empowered all he said and did.

On this day, when we remember the baptism of our Lord, we will baptize Annette and Gabrielle and Liam and Finley and Colin, who will be made members of the Church and proclaimed to be God's beloved children, marked as Christ's own forever. We will also remember our own baptisms, and when we remember our baptisms, we remember that we too were declared to be God's beloved sons and daughters. In each of our baptisms, we hear the echo of the same voice that came from heaven saying, “You are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter; with you I am well pleased.” In our baptism, the fundamental truth of our identity is revealed. God loves us. We are the beloved children of God. Each and every one of us is a marvel. God loves us more than we love ourselves. There is nothing we can do to make

God love us more and nothing we can do to make God love us less. Imagine the power this might have if we really knew it to the core of our being.

Maya Angelou recalls the transformation that took place in her own life when she, for the first time, really understood the truth of God's love for her. She writes, "One day the teacher, Frederick Wilkerson, asked me to read to him. I was twenty-four, very erudite, very worldly. He asked that I read from *Lessons in Truth*, a section which ended with these words: 'God loves me.' I read the piece and closed the book, and the teacher said, 'Read it again.' I pointedly opened the book, and I sarcastically read 'God loves me.' He said, 'Again.' After about the seventeenth repetition I began to sense that there might be truth in the statement, that there was a possibility that God really did love me. Me, Maya Angelou. I suddenly began to cry at the grandness of it all. I knew that if God loved me, then I could do wonderful things, learn anything, achieve anything. For what could stand against me with God, since one person, any person with God, constitutes the majority?"

Imagine what it would be like if you really knew the truth that God loves you. Not just a general abstract truth about God's universal love, but the strong, particular voice that proclaims, "You are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter, with you I am well pleased." It's almost more than we can comprehend. It might fill us up; inflate us like a balloon. Our hearts might burst. Our veins might boil up. Our eyes might pop out. If we knew that God loved us, then we could do wonderful things, learn anything, achieve anything. It might feel like the heavens were torn apart or the Spirit like a dove descended upon us. We might be suffused with tears of gratitude and wonder. We might feel ourselves reestablished as giving, living, full human beings with every right to everything right on this earth. Imagine what it would be like.

My brothers and sisters, do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all the years that have passed, there has never been another like you. God loves you for all eternity. Like a lover who spends all his time thinking of his distant love, God has been thinking of you since before you were born. There is nothing you can do to make God love you more and nothing you can do to make God love you less. Our adoption is forever. You are the beloved sons and beloved daughters of God, with whom he is well pleased.

Imagine that!