

Rev Rita Message May 2 2021

Henri Nouwen was an internationally renowned priest and author, respected professor and beloved pastor who wrote 39 books on the spiritual life. He corresponded regularly in English, Dutch, German, French and Spanish with hundreds of friends and reached out to thousands through his lectures and retreats. In 1985, at the age of 53, he felt called by God to join a French L'Arche community where people with developmental disabilities live with assistants. A year later Nouwen came to make his home at L'Arche Daybreak near Toronto.

In his book, *Life of the Beloved*, Henri describes how, one day, a disabled community member named Janet came up and asked him for a blessing. Henri was distracted by other things, so he quickly traced the sign of the cross on her forehead. "No," protested Janet. "I want a real blessing!"

Henri understood, then, how he had been insensitive to her need. He promised that, at the next prayer service, he would have a special blessing for her.

At the end of the prayer service, about thirty people were sitting in a circle on the floor. Henri announced, "Janet has asked me for a special blessing."

He didn't quite know what she was seeking from him, but her next move left no doubt. She walked up to him and wrapped her arms around him. As he embraced her in return, her slight form was almost covered by the folds of the white robe he was wearing.

As they held each other, Henri said "Janet, I want you to know that you are God's Beloved Daughter. You are precious in God's eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house, and all the good things you do show what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you."

Janet raised her head and looked at him. Her beaming smile told him that she had truly understood and received the kind of blessing she needed.

As Janet returned to her place, another woman raised her hand. She, too, wanted a blessing. She stood up and embraced Henri, too, laying her face against his chest. After that, a great many more took their turn for the same sort of blessing.

For Henri, the most touching moment was when one of the assistants, a twenty-four-year-old college student, raised his hand and asked, "And what about me?" John was a big, burly young man, an athlete. Henri did the same with him, wrapping his arms around him and saying,

“John, it is so good that you are here. You are God's Beloved Son...”

John looked back with tears in his eyes and simply said, “Thank you, thank you very much.”

In his writings and talks, Henri Nouwen often reminded his readers and audiences that: “Jesus came into the world to open our ears to God’s voice that continually says to us, “You are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter, my favor rests on you.” When we can hear that voice, trust in it, and always remember it, especially during dark times, we can live our lives as God’s blessed children and find the strength to share that blessing with others.

Blessings and curses are always placed in front of us. We are free to choose. God says: “Choose the blessings!”

Max Lucado shares a lovely story in his book *Anxious for Nothing* about his friend Jerry and the choice to embrace the blessings God gives us. He writes:

“My friend Jerry has taught me the value of gratitude. He is seventy-eight years old and regularly shoots his age on the golf course. If I ever do the same, I’ll need to live to be a hundred! His dear wife, Ginger, battles Parkinson’s disease. What should have been a wonderful season of retirement has been marred by multiple hospital stays, medication, and struggles. Many days she cannot keep her balance. Jerry has to be at her side. Yet he never complains. He always has a smile and a joke. And he relentlessly beats me in golf!

I asked Jerry his secret. He said, “Every morning Ginger and I sit together and sing a hymn. I ask her what she wants to sing. She always says, *Count Your Blessings*. So we sing it; and we count our blessings.” Take a moment concludes Lucado and follow Jerry’s example. Count your blessings.

Mark Buchanan is a professor at Ambrose College in Calgary. He tells the story about a group of children who were asked what a blessing of love looked like.

Rebecca, age 8, said, "When my grandmother got arthritis, she could not bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does this for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too."

Billy, age 4, said, "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know your name is safe in their mouth."

Whose toenails are you painting? Whose name is safe in your mouth? Who would say you are a blessing in their life?

