

God's Beloved Called to Soar Like an Eagle

An Indian brave came upon an egg which had somehow fallen unbroken from an eagle's nest. Unable to find the nest, the brave put the egg in the nest of a prairie chicken where it was hatched by the brooding mother hen. The fledging eagle, with its proverbial strong eyes, saw the world for the first time. Looking at the other prairie chickens, he did what they did. He crawled and scratched the earth, pecked here and there for stray grains and husks, now and then rising in a flutter a few feet above the earth and then descending again. He accepted and imitated the daily routine of the earthbound prairie chickens. And he spent most of his life this way.

Then one day an eagle flew over the brood of prairie chickens. The now aging eagle, who still thought he was a prairie chicken, looked up in awed admiration as the great bird soared through the skies. "What is that?" he gasped in astonishment. One of the old prairie chickens replied, "I have seen one before. That is the eagle, the proudest, strongest, and the most magnificent of all the birds. But don't you ever dream that you could be like that. You're like the rest of us and we are all prairie chickens."

*And so shackled by this belief, the eagle lived and died thinking he was a prairie chicken.**

Today our Scriptures call us to reflect on our identity as *God's Beloved*. In the story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan we see also our own calling by God to be one with Christ by our dying in the waters of baptism and rising with him to new life. We too are called "BELOVED" by God at our baptism. Unfortunately, who of us, baptized as infants, experience the power of that moment? But the reality is not changed because of a lack of awareness of that initiating event: WE ARE BELOVED.

If we ignore that reality of our baptism, then we are like that eagle in the story, pathetically shackled throughout our existence to be something less than we are destined to be. We can fall into that trap in two ways.

First, even as a faithful disciple we can fall into the trap of believing that we are not worthy to soar like an eagle. The fallacy here is that we consider as earned what is actually a freely given gift flowing from God's unconditional love. Perhaps we are mistakenly supported in this misconception by the prayer we offer before receiving the

Eucharist: "Lord, I am not worthy...." The intention of that prayer is to emphasize the giftedness of the Eucharist; it is not intended to deny our self-worth. The Roman Centurion whom we paraphrase in that prayer humbly recognized who he was in the presence of the great healer. That's the attitude that prayer should evoke in us.

Jesus died and rose to bring us to a new way of life so that we would no longer have to "crawl and scratch at the earth, pecking here and there for stray grains and husks"! On the contrary, through our baptism he invites us here to this place to feast at an abundant banquet, not because we earned it, but rather simply because he loves us, warts and all!

Secondly, our culture deceives us into believing that we are mere prairie chickens by accepting a secular, materialistic worldview. There are those who would tell us that what we have here in this world is of lasting value: that what is earthbound--wealth, power, position--is as far we can aspire, that the best we can hope for is to "now and then rise and flutter a few feet above the earth and then descend again."

There are voices among us that would propose that we can aspire no higher: *"Don't you ever dream that you could be like that eagle. You're like the rest of us and we are prairie chickens."* These voices of contemporary culture invite us to be shackled to this belief.

But there is another voice, beckoning us, calling us "BELOVED!" In this Eucharist we hear again the words of Isaiah spoken of all of us who are the body of Christ in the world:

*"Here is my beloved whom I uphold,
my chosen with whom I am well pleased.
I, the Lord, have called you for the victory of justice,
I have formed you, and set you as... a light for the nations,
To open the eyes of the blind,
to bring out prisoners from confinement,
and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness."*

These words proclaimed in today's celebration confirm for us that through baptism we are called not to be shackled by the belief that we are mere prairie chickens, but rather by God's gracious favor you and I are called to soar like an eagle.

* This legendary tale owes its origins to our gifted Native American storytellers.