

DECEMBER 18, 2022

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON December 11, Advent: Love , 1 John 4:7-13, Luke 1:46-55

This week we continue our series of Advent. We've looked at hope and joy, and this week we look at love. I'd argue that love is at the root of everything. God's love is the root of the hope we have in Christ; God's love is at the root of our joy as joy finds itself in the love of God.

When we look at love, if we're going to do adequate service to the concept, we have to consider the fullness of love if we're going to consider it at all. In our language the word love is used to cover a huge spectrum of experiences. We "love" pizza. We also have people and ideals that we "love" enough to lay down our lives for. There is a far cry between really liking a food and holding something or someone so dear we'd give our life for it.

So we need to look at the diverse realities surrounding this term.

We have to consider all of the sentiments of love. There is of course the romantic love. This is that warm, fuzzy, gushy feeling between two folk. It expresses itself in unique ways that are only between those two folk. It's the stuff of marriage. It is also singular in nature.

Then there is the love that's platonic. It's amongst friends and family. It is deep, loyal, and abiding. In fact it sometimes even gets in the way of romantic love because the feels are so big. It is a commitment. This love has a much broader scope. We can experience it with unlimited numbers of people, though the depth of it is such that it's cultivated by those with whom we share the most time and trust in life.

But beyond this there is the love that surpasses our general sensibilities. It's the love that extends literally to every person in creation. It doesn't matter if we "like" them. It's a matter of innate dignity and God given childhood. We love because God loves. We love because of this 1 John love. We love because that's our call. We see that within even the most hurtful hateful person, there is the light of God within that is gracious and good. And so we love. We show compassion. We show grace.

This is what it means to follow Christ. Putting aside personal preferences in favor of showing love and grace to whomever, whenever. Love of God and love of neighbor. It's not optional. 1 John is quite clear. God is love, which is God's image. If we are made in the image of God we are made in the image of love. To act or be in any way counter to love is incorrect. In fact we are told that if we don't love we are liars. We do not belong to God. Jesus Himself both instructs and demonstrates that love isn't only for our friends and family, it's for everyone including our enemies. God's love is boundless and so we strive for that same offering to the world around us.

But there's more. Because when love gets wrapped up in a feeling, it gets distorted. It gets twisted into something that's temporary or incidental. Feelings come and go. They are fleeting. Choices on the other hand are different. They are lasting and consistent.

This is the love of Mary in what is considered her "song" of joy. Think about that. She's shamed. Pregnant out of wedlock. Sent away to her cousin because she's pregnant outside of her marriage to Joseph. Yet her heart sings with joy.

Why?

It's because she's already chosen to love God. She's made that decision to love no matter what. Loving God regardless of circumstance and feeling that love returned warms Mary's heart and enables her to sing for joy.

What does Jesus tell His disciples at the last supper? He says to them "if you love me obey my commands." He's not asking them to "feel" a certain way. He's not telling them to contrive some false emotion. He knows He's about to go to

His end. He knows His personal time with them is over. So He lets them know how they can show their love for Him. Follow His instructions.

No matter if love is romantic, platonic, or just that overarching love because someone is a child of God, it all comes down to the same thing. It's a choice. We choose to act in love, or not. Love isn't some passive feeling. It's an active decision. We decide to love regardless of whether or not we "like" someone or feel like it. Love is a choice.

Mary chose to love despite the inconvenience to her life. Even before her son would utter the words that loving Him means following His commands, she understood what loving God looked like. It looked like following God's lead.

The idea of love is a dodgy one. Even though I've tried to describe it here in some fashion, words always fall short. They especially fall short when the feeling is so incredibly deep. Even if we have trouble describing it, we tend to know what it looks like. It's the phone call from a friend who knows we've had a bad day. It's the unexpected flowers "just because". It's the sandwich offered to the stranger on the street who is struggling to find something to eat. It's the forgiveness offered when we've been offended and it's accepting that forgiveness when we've given offense. These are actions. They are actions fueled with love for one another. Even when words fail to define it, we nevertheless still feel it, see it, and are called to do it.

Each and every day we have a choice to make. Will I love? Will I set aside self for the sake of loving whomever's path I cross? Intentional action begins with intentional choice. And I offer a suggestion about the state of mind necessary to make that decision. We can't be flooded with emotion. Good or bad. If we are feeling wildly good the chemicals in our brains don't put us in our right mind. Commitments and promises come easily, and unfortunately when the feeling wears off the promises and commitments can be easily broken. Similarly if we are in a dark place, we may find every reason to not make the choice to enter the day in a loving state of heart and mind. Our emotions drive us. The time to make intentional choices is when we're clear headed. So we can move forward with an honestly steeled resolve, focus on God, and willingness to do what is necessary to act in love. To love Jesus by following His commands.

Love is one Sunday in Advent. Yet if we trust that one day Jesus will return, we are in a state of Advent constantly. Each day make the choice. Watch your love change circumstances around you. And watch that same love change you more into the image of Jesus Christ.

BIBLE STUDY Romans 4

Paul has been going at both Jew and Gentile alike through the beginning of this letter. He's been working to help them understand something about the nature of faith, and the nature of what it means to be "chosen." Here he goes right for the big target. He brings up Abraham. This is fitting and sensible, particularly for a Jewish audience, as Abraham is where it all began for them. Abraham trusted God, and allowed himself to be led by God into a covenant and a promise. The whole notion of faith and works comes to a sharp point here. Abraham preceded Moses. In other words to assume that Abraham was following the Law is an error. The Law hadn't even been given yet. This doesn't mean Abraham was immoral or a problem. It simply means that what he had to go on was his relationship with God and the internal compass God gave him to follow, or choose to not.

One of the great questions Paul is now beginning to answer is who belongs to Abraham's family? So much of that question has been tied up in ethnicity and culture. It is the blood descendants of Abraham and so forth. This people was entrusted with a covenant, a Law, to brighten the world. This people was entrusted with a lineage that would one day see the Messiah into this world. So the idea that the children of Abraham are according to the flesh is understandable even if incorrect. It's how we determine family trees even today. Where do our ancestors come from? What is in our DNA? That said, we can't forget that family grows beyond that. As an adopted child myself I know this firsthand. I'm not a Stouffer by blood, but I am absolutely every bit a Stouffer. The idea of adoption becomes significant.

Since there were no works outlined specifically for Abraham, we are reminded that what was counted to him as righteous was faith. He trusted God, followed God, and believed in the promises of God. That faith is what made Abraham right in God's eyes. It didn't mean he was perfect, but it did mean that he allowed that faith and trust to shape who he would become. Works follow faith, not the other way around.

Paul talks about the one who justifies the ungodly. Through what? Through their faith. The image of workers and pay is a good one. Pay for a job done isn't a gift, it's fair wages and pay. This isn't the grace of God. It is a gift. In fact it has to be. When we are talking about ourselves as "workmen", we have to acknowledge that our works are always a mixed bag. Never perfect. Because it is simply sin that separates us from God, this mixed bag is a disqualifying one, unless... Unless there is a gift that makes up the difference which can't be earned or bought, just offered and accepted. This is faith.

Who are the ungodly in vs. 5? All of us. Same problem which is sin. Same solution which is faith. David is simply used as an Old Testament illustration that from the times of ancient Israel, faith has been the one constant that makes us right with God.

What follows is a tremendous example of Paul's use of logic, and also a reminder that if we are going to interpret scripture as correctly as possible, details matter. The issue of circumcision was a very real one for these early Christians. We've

noted before the problem of Jewish Christians trying to force circumcision on Gentiles, which Paul railed against passionately. To put to bed this issue, Paul looks to when Abraham was counted righteous. It was before he was circumcised, not after. Faith is apart from works and in this case circumcision. Abraham, uncircumcised Abraham, was called righteous by God. If uncircumcised Abraham could be justified through faith, so can the uncircumcised Gentile. Of course this alongside the circumcised Jew.

Faith drove Abraham, not the Law. The Law couldn't as it hadn't been delivered yet. Faith is what pushed his descendants to stay the course of their ancestors following God. This doesn't mean that works are meaningless. Quite the contrary. Our works demonstrate whether the faith we claim is genuine. But focusing in on works as a new law under Jesus or as the Old Law of Moses is problematic. Getting lasered in on the "rules" can actually draw us away from the One we are trying to please through them. This was the issue the Jews were facing in the time of Christ. Too much rules, too many loopholes, too little acting out the reason for the rules to begin with. Right and wrong is about pleasing God and loving one another. Faith is what drives us to this desire and end.

As Paul writes elsewhere we should contemplate the things of the Spirit. If we do this our focus is automatically in the right place and we are more inclined to act in keeping with God's desires. Dwelling on the "do not's", or the "works of the flesh", puts our headspace right where we don't want it. Thinking about all the stuff we may be tempted to do but shouldn't. Faith is the origin of goodness for those who believe.

At this point, the message has been made clear through Christians that the Law is insufficient. Paul points out again that if grace can be earned by works, then the relationship between God and Abraham has no meaning or value. If the original agreement was based on faith, but then the Law could be a substitute there's no need for faith at all. Just follow the rules. The problem inherent is that if it's about a perfect track record then the only possible outcome from that path is judgement. Faith on the other hand produces a discerning conscience, which leads us towards God and forgiveness. Next comes the adoption piece. If the reality is that only those under the Law could be declared righteous, it leaves out the vast majority of all humanity. Paul introducing that it's faith, not Law is a game changer. It also sheds some light on the whole "many nations" promise. Faith is available to everyone. Nationality, gender, status, nothing stands in the way. The promise to Abraham was all about the coming Messiah who would redeem all of humanity, not just part. So the mistaken view that it was only the Israelites who were partakers of the promises to Abraham is now corrected. If Abraham's line was the original "family", that family just grew dramatically. The deciding factor isn't ethnicity or culture, it's faith. Abraham is the father of all who would take that gift, and so he is the father of more than we could possibly imagine. "As many as the grains of sand on the shore."

In fact God "giving life to the dead" is very much about this adoption of the Gentiles. The Jews were heirs of the promise with a long history of that relationship with God. The Gentiles quite literally raised up from scratch into this covenant of faith. They were "dead" in their ignorance and lack of relationship with God, but now brought to life because Christ had come and they are invited into a redeeming relationship with Him.

Once again we see something corrective for our day and age. Too much Christianity has fallen into that same old egotistical, Pharisaical mindset that there are some who are "in" and some "out". There are those who deserve to be invited to be part of us, and those that don't. New walls are built to keep "those people" out. Pick your poison, it depends on where we find this mentality as to what the markers are that either make someone unwelcome or at least make sure they are kept at a distance. Race, gender, status, orientation, appearance, and so much more. Those that indulge this attitude need to be reminded of Paul's words here in Romans. All are invited because all are desired by God. All are offered the gift because God has already offered it. Faith is the only factor at play, and that faith will work in each of us to straighten our whatever crooked exists. The closer we are to Christ, the greater the impact. So we don't push away. We invite in and walk alongside one another on journeys toward God that happen both individually and together.

The "raising the dead" continues as Paul keeps on driving home the faith of Abraham. Despite his age he still believed God. Conveniently the incident with Hagar isn't mentioned here. This might be considered a lapse in faith, yet what mattered isn't that Abraham had a momentary lapse. What mattered is that he continued on despite it, walking with God and striving towards faithful obedience. This is something that sets Abraham apart in many ways because even without the Law he avoided the trap so many fell into. Where so many of God's people through the centuries succumbed to idolatry at the influence of other cultures, Abraham did not. Through thick and thin he put all his eggs in one basket, God's. This devoted, honest faith incorporates Abraham into one of the "greats" in Hebrews' "hall of fame of faith".

Chapter 4 finishes out with this wonderful sensibility that the credit of righteousness isn't reserved for Abraham. It extends to each and every person who embraces God and the risen Christ. There is a tremendous theological punch in the final verses. That God raised Jesus from the grave is the stamp of approval and evidence of Jesus identity as the Messiah. Jesus died for our sin, but was raised in power and glory to make us right before God. The promise of new life, and eternal life, is bound in the moment of resurrection. So for Paul this becomes central to everything he is teaching and encouraging. It is central to faith. What is foundational? Faith in God, and faith in what God accomplished through Jesus Christ. Everything else stems from that.

We can't separate all of this talk about faith and grace from what's come before. It doesn't negate that works matter. The first chapters Paul was very explicit that the sinful works of Jew and Gentile alike are a problem. If the bad is a problem, then the good is necessary. Now, however the discussion has turned to make sure there is no mistaking what the core of salvation and union with God looks like. It begins with faith, and that faith can be accepted by anyone. Jew or Gentile it doesn't matter.

This is a wonderful message and truth. If it's true for them it's true for us. Paul's statement that the promise of redemption through faith alone wasn't for Abraham alone. It wasn't limited just to those early believers. It extends to today and forever hereafter. We are offered the same gift and have the same calling to receive it and experience the adventure that follows led by the Holy Spirit, imitating Christ, and trusting God.