

Psalm 136:1-9, 22-26
John 13:31-35
Galatians 5:22-23...

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
July 3, 2022

Cultivating Love

Introduction to the Psalm

Scripture's declaration of God being a God of love doesn't just occur in the New Testament in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. We hear the same in the Old Testament. The events recalled in our Psalm bear forth the identity of the Lord being a God of steadfast love, encompassing all times. Listen to these words from Psalm 136:1-9 and 22-26...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson, which occurs right after Jesus had shared the Last Supper with his disciples and Judas had gone out to betray him, Jesus gave the remaining disciples A New Commandment. Listen to these words from John 13:31-35...

Introduction to the Epistle

In our Epistle Lesson Paul implores the Galatians to turn away from self-centered living and toward the fruit that is born in our lives by God's Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ. Listen to these words from Galatians 5:22-23...

Sermon

There are lots of love stories that end in death: Great literary works like William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, and more recently the movie "Pride of the Yankees"—the story of slugger Lou Gehrig and his courage in the face of ALS, which took his life at age 37. Then there is "West Side Story," and "Love Story."

There's another love story in the Bible that appears to end in death. It's the story of God's love. It was there in the escape of Israel from Egyptian slavery. It was there in the wilderness with manna from heaven. It was there in the guidance to the Promised Land. In the book of Ruth we see God's love, not just for Israel, but for foreigners. And we read of it in our Psalm for today:

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures for ever (136:1).

While the love in the stories noted earlier was a romantic love, or *eros*, the love in John 3:16 is *agape* love.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Hardly ever used in Greek-speaking societies, the word *agape* is found 320 times in the New Testament. And it refers to God's self-sacrificing love, which never ends. God's love which reaches out, to draw lost people in. God's love which "is patient and kind, not envious or boastful, or arrogant or rude" (2 Cor 13:4-5a). It's that same Greek word *agape* that Paul uses in Galatians 5 for the first of the fruits of the Spirit.

The God we worship is the One who not only said he would die for us, but did. For the test of love is the length to which it will go. "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rm. 5:8). There is something here that speaks to all of us. When we stand beneath the Cross of Jesus, we cannot help getting down on our knees and bowing our heads in wonder before the greatness and the graciousness of the love of God. For God so loves.

How does God show his love for us? Not by a weak indulgence which passes over what should not be, as if it does not matter. Not by a cheap grace, but by a costly grace—a grace that cost the death of his only begotten Son. God shows his love for us by doing all that he can do, by giving all that he can give—his very self in his only begotten Son—for us and our salvation.

Jesus says that if we keep his commandment we will abide in his love. And his commandment is that we love one another, as he has loved us. Jesus teaches these things in order that his joy may be in us, and our joy may be complete. (We'll hear more about the fruit of joy next week.) It is this gift of the *agape* love of Jesus that abides. Paul spoke of it in that First Letter to the Church in Corinth. He said that faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (13:13) Jesus invites us to an abiding love of him, a love that is committed and sure. The Spirit brings back the love of Christ and directs it through us not only to one another but in ever widening circles to others through bearing the fruits of the Spirit.

And when you think of it, as important as is our theology and our *Book of Confessions*; as important as is our polity (our form of government) and our *Book of Order*; what really holds us together is our love for Christ and for one another.

Remember when Jesus spoke to Simon Peter in an appearance following his resurrection? Peter had denied that he even knew Jesus just before his crucifixion. Well, now Jesus restores Peter by a three-fold question about Peter's love for him. And if Peter loves Jesus, he is commissioned to a career of shepherding: “Feed my lambs.” “Tend my sheep.”

The call to a life of shepherding is a call to the kind of acts of loving care that are sometimes difficult and sometimes time-consuming—visitation of those who are home-bound or sick, help to the neighbor who is suffering through a crisis, visiting someone in the hospital, making a phone call, sending a note. We just need to cast the net of the gospel into the world.

Cast the net of the gospel to where people are sick or lonely, broken and forlorn. Cast the net of the gospel to where people are hungry and hurting. Cast the net of the gospel to where people are forgotten and lost.

So, how can we cultivate this gift of agape love in our lives today? Let me suggest several things. First, that we start paying more attention to others. True Worship teaches the art of paying attention to others—by paying attention to God. John Calvin said:

Believers have no greater help than public worshiping, for by it, God raises his own folk upward step by step (*Institutes* 4.1.5).

In Worship we set aside self-centered living and focus our attention on the One who creates and sustains all life. And we hear God say:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another (Jn. 13:34).

Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. Here was a Jewish traveler who was stripped, beaten, and left half-dead by the side of the road. A Jewish priest and then a Levite come along and pass by on the other side. Then a Samaritan happens upon the man, and even though there was hatred between Jews and Samaritans, he helps the injured man. He binds up his wounds, sets him on his own animal, brings him to an inn, and takes care of him. The next day he gives the innkeeper some money and tells him to care for the man. Which of the three proves to be a neighbor? The Samaritan, of course, for he shows mercy.

In the sacrament of the Lord's Supper we receive again God's gifts in the bread and his body broken for us. In the cup and his blood shed for us. Yet, there is also God's call to give the gifts of our time, our talents, and our resources. In tangible ways to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Elizabeth O’Conner, in her book *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, tells the story of The Church of Our Savior in Washington, D.C., and its innovative ministries. She writes of the church’s vital balance of deepening the inner life while reaching out to a world in need.

What if we were to begin each day this week by asking God to give us eyes to see the needs of others. And those others can include not only the poor and sick, but the needs of others right around us. Family, friends, next-door neighbors, business associates, classmates in school, people who sit in the pews near us on Sunday mornings.

What if we took a few minutes each day and spent it with our prayer list or our church directory, focusing on one or two individuals or families? Then praying for them. And that might lead us to reach out to them in some tangible way. This July Fourth weekend we’re thinking about and thanking God for our country and its freedom. Let us also pray for our country. That our good be crowned with brotherhood. That we can continue to be a source of hope for all the world.

What if we gave some real thought to our practice of stewardship and how we are using what God has placed in our trust. Stewardship is not just tied to the church’s finances, but a responsible use of God’s gifts. Again, Calvin said:

Let this, therefore, be our rule for generosity and beneficence: We are the stewards of everything God has conferred on us by which we are able to help our neighbor, and are required to render account of our stewardship. Moreover, the only right stewardship is that which is tested by the rule of love (*Institutes* 3.7.5).

Let me close with this little prayer that I found in the 1946 *Book of Common Worship* (approved by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America). It’s in the section entitled “Prayers for Special Graces,” under the heading of “For Love.”

O Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without love are nothing worth: Send Thy Holy Spirit, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love, the very bond of peace and of all virtues; grant this for Thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

And Amen.