

“A WEEPING, LOVING GOD”

John 14:15-21 May 28th, 2017

This week we continue listening in on Jesus’s final conversation with his disciples on the night before his death. Imagine that we are sitting with Jesus and his disciples around a table. Jesus has already tried to show what God’s love is like to his disciples. They have shared a meal. He has washed their feet. He has told them he will not be with them for very much longer.

Last week, we talked about how, just as Jesus reached out to embrace his disciples, Jesus reaches out to embrace us. He invites us into unity with the Triune God. He draws us into the body of Christ. It is his work, not ours, that makes us one with him. *What were some of the key words you remember from our discussion last week?* (comfort, reassurance, trust...)

Now he tells his disciples, and he tells us, that even though he is going away, he is not leaving us alone. The Father is sending an advocate, the very Spirit of God, to be with us forever. In addition, Jesus is leaving us something to follow besides him. He is leaving a new commandment. We are to love one another. We are to love one another as he has loved us. If his disciples obey his commandment to love one another, Jesus says, even after he has left the world, and the world can no longer see him, his disciples will still be able to see him. He says that when we have the commandments and keep them, we will be loved by His Father and he will love us and reveal himself to us. *Why is it so important to us to know that Jesus is not leaving us alone?*

So Jesus is very clear here in his instruction. He tells us exactly what to do. He tells us to love one another as he has loved, and he promises that the Spirit of the Triune God will continue to be present as we live into his command

to love one another the way that he loved not just his disciples, but all God's people. *Why is it important to love "all God's people?"*

We are to love one another the way that Jesus loved his disciples.

How did Jesus love his disciples? He loved them by giving, not by taking. He asked not that they serve him, but that they serve one another!! He taught them how to love with his words. And he taught them how to love by his actions.

~ He showed how to love by the way he lived.

~ He showed how to love by the way he acted in the world and by the things he did.

~ He showed how to love by continually looking for ways to give himself to almost everyone he met.

Jesus loved all kinds of people. He loved the poor, the oppressed, the outcasts, the sick and diseased, the mentally ill, the deformed, the blind, the lame, the deaf, and the dumb. He loved women and children. He loved those inside his faith community and those from outside it. He loved people from cultural and ethnic groups other than his own. *Is it difficult for us to show that kind of love, the Jesus kind of love, in today's world?*

Jesus gave himself in love to others by teaching them, healing them, and just plain old hanging around with them. Jesus didn't surround himself with the successful people of his generation. He didn't hang out with the glamorous, beautiful, powerful, and wealthy folks. He didn't choose friends and associates for what he could get for himself out of those relationships. Jesus chose to spend his time with the rejects of his generation. That's who Jesus went around with. Because Jesus wasn't into relationships for personal gain. He wasn't looking for fame or worldly power or popularity. He was not looking to *get* something out of

his relationship with someone else.

He was looking to *give* himself to anybody and everybody who needed someone to love them and do for them. *Does that sound like a discouraging goal for us to follow today? How do we even start to begin to love like that?*

Now, of course, you and I are not Jesus. Most of us are not able to give ourselves to the people of this world in the same way that Jesus gave himself. But we can try. We can practice. And the more we practice, the more we learn to love by concentrating on giving rather than getting, the more at peace we are with ourselves.

The good news is, when we are trying to learn to love one another the way Jesus loved his disciples, we are not alone in this work. God helps us. The Father has sent an Advocate, the Spirit, to us to strengthen and lift up our hearts. The Spirit of God precedes us in our work of loving. The Spirit is already at work in the world. God's Spirit is all around us: in nature, in the sun that warms the earth every single morning—winter, spring, summer, and fall. God's spirit is here, in all the multiple forms of life that surround us, whether we live in a tropical place or the Arctic, the jungle or the desert, the mountains or plains, or the *beautiful* bluffs and land around our city of Pine Bluffs.

Where have you seen God's Spirit at work in the past week?

No matter where we are on this beautiful earth, some form of life, some evidence of God's creation, some testimony to God's steadfast love for this world, is with us. And the testimony of all forms of life is that we must give ourselves away for the good of the next generation. Each life form must give sacrificially in order for the next generation to continue to thrive.

When I was teaching I had a team-mate who was hooked on the soap opera, *The Days of Our Lives*. He would spend his lunch period grading papers

and watching the day's adventures on his program. Some people are equally hooked on the Wheel of Fortune game show or Judge Judy. There was a particular Judge Judy episode in which there was a man who had somehow gotten into a car chase with his son. The incident ended with the son wrecking the car he was driving. The father was in court to sue the son for the damage to the car. Well, Judge Judy was absolutely furious with the father. She told him that even the simplest, most unthinking life forms on the planet instinctively knew it was important to protect their young and not put them in danger. Lions protected their young, she said. Deer protected their young. Birds protected their young. Her point was that no matter what, this man should have known, instinctively, that to put his son in danger by chasing him down the street in a car stood in sharp contrast to the normal behavior of most of God's creatures. It simply was not right for a father to go after his own son in this way, no matter what the son had done.

Do you agree with Judge Judy's interpretation of this case? Why or why not?

We human beings may be very smart creatures in the animal world, but we have a tendency to lose focus. Our self-centeredness gets the best of us. It is our particular sin to bear. It overpowers our will to do what is right. It tempts us to prioritize ourselves—what I can get, what I can achieve, what I can be, how much money I can make for myself and my family—and that takes our focus away from loving others.

Praise God that Christ does not abandon us to our own fallen natures. Praise God for sending the Spirit to help us. God's spirit is here, all around us and in us, reminding us and nudging us to love others as Jesus loved his disciples. All we have to do is follow in the way of Jesus. All we have to do is read the stories of how he loved. God has already given us the very best example on earth of how

we are meant to love one another. We learn to love the right way by getting to know Jesus.

In Ralph Milton's story called "Mother's Strong Arms", he tells about his mother who died a number of years ago. He writes that he is offering it because his mother—unconsciously but very powerfully—taught him about the presence of God and about prayer.

"Mother had aged ten years in 12 months. It's not that there was anything wrong. It's just that everything was wrong. The fingers that could crochet a pair of slippers in half an hour simply wouldn't move anymore. The heart that had laughed and cried with all the many people she loved, had developed a malfunction. That never stopped her heart from loving, but last Saturday it stopped her heart from beating.

Mother knew death was near. But she wasn't afraid of death. It was the dying that was so painful, so frightening. Mother and I had a long talk in the hospital a few months ago. She held my hand very tightly and asked, "You won't abandon me just because I'm so useless?"

"Of course not, Mom. How could I abandon you?"

"But I'm so useless. I can't do anything anymore. I'm no good for anything."

"Mom, I love you. Of course I won't abandon you. Neither will the rest of your family."

"But what good am I? I can't do anything except just sit here and stare at the walls."

At first I thought Mother's fear was of being abandoned by her children. But that wasn't it. She knew us better than that. Her pain was far deeper. It was the pain our whole society inflicts on us—that teaches us we are valued for what

we can produce, by how well we can perform, by what we can achieve. It was a pain we all share. Of course, deep down Mother knew the greater truth.

Earlier we had been talking about the latest great-grandchild. He had been born on Valentine's Day, and we laughed over a photograph showing a heart-shaped birthmark on his bottom. "I guess babies can't do anything either," she said. I knew what she meant. Babies are useless, but they are precious. Old people are useless, in this context anyway, but they are precious.

In fact all of us, when you come right down to it, are pretty useless. But we are precious. Precious, I hope, to other people. Precious at least to God, who sees the sparrow fall and numbers the hairs on our head.

"Mom," I said. "Do you remember how often you told me about the time when I was just a kid, and I'd be playing out in the back yard, and every once in a while I would run into the house and I would leap up into your arms and get a quick hug, and then run right back out again?"

She held my hand a little tighter. She remembered.

"Mom, you had strong arms, and even though I'd take a flying leap at you, you'd always catch me and give me a hug."

She smiled. "I probably couldn't catch you in my arms anymore, Ralph."

"I know, Mom. But I still come running in for a hug. Only now, you catch me with your heart."

How do you think this story reminds us of God's love for us? (He doesn't abandon us, He catches us when we fall, we are embraced by Him whenever we come, His arms are always strong enough to comfort us and hold us tight, God's love is always present for his precious children and unconditional...)

As we talked about last week, our first step in getting to know Jesus is

to say yes to his embrace. When he reaches out to us, we have to say yes to his invitation into unity with him. But there is more to knowing Jesus than just saying yes. While it is important to say yes and to turn and take a first step toward having a personal relationship with him, the fact is, saying yes to being embraced into unity with Jesus is only the first step into the relationship.

To really know Jesus requires many steps and a much greater commitment. We get to know Jesus by making our relationship with him a priority. We get to know him by devoting our time daily to studying his life and ways. We get to know him by reading and rereading the Bible. We get to know him by partaking of the bread of life and the blood of the new covenant. We get to know him by comparing our own experiences of Jesus with the experiences that other followers of Jesus have had. We get to know him by doing on-the-job training: through worship and through mission and through practicing over and over the art of loving others the way that Jesus loved.

It isn't an easy thing. It takes time and effort, trial and error. It takes trying to intentionally love others over the course of our entire lives to learn to love God's world as Jesus loved it. So the sooner we get started learning God's way of loving, as taught by Jesus, the better off we are.

Can I get an Amen from all of you who love God?!?!? Amen and amen.