

## God is Love!

Most people think of weddings when they hear this reading from Corinthians. I personally think it is a great reading for a funeral especially the last verse. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” This states that when we see God face to face after we have died all that is left is love. Faith and hope are needed while here, but ultimately it is all about love.

That love is what I want to pick up on this morning. The past two weeks we have heard Paul talking to a fractured church about what it means to be a member of the body of Christ. We have heard how important all parts of the body are and that no part should be excluded or put down.

Now Paul turns to the ultimate subject of love. The 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of First Corinthians may be one of the best known passages yet very few people understand what a radical statement this is. In doing some research on this many years ago I discovered that Paul does something very different in this passage. He uses agape for love and that is the form used for the highest form of love in the Greek language. However he does not use it as a verb, which is the most common form. He uses love as a noun and this makes a big difference.

Gordon Fee in his book on this epistle states that we can actually replace the word love with God or Jesus. Stop and think for a moment what a difference this makes in the passage. He also challenges us to consider putting our name in the place of the word love and realize that is how God wants us to be. This is a very tall order and one that meets an amazing amount of resistance.

This past snowy weekend All Saints Pasadena broadcast their services live for anyone who was snowed in on the east coast and The Rev. Susan Russell promoted this social media. The preacher was Bishop Gene Robinson and he preached a wonderful sermon. One line that really jumped out at me was the following:

“It’s funny isn’t it? That you can preach a judgmental and vengeful and angry God and nobody will mind. But you start preaching a God that is too accepting, too loving, too forgiving, too merciful, too kind...and you are in trouble.” Bishop Gene Robinson Jan. 24 All Saints Pasadena.

This is very true and one story about that concerns Rob Bell. Rob was the pastor of a large mega church when he had an epiphany about God’s love. He wrote about this in his book “Love Wins.” This is a wonderful book that the Wednesday night group read several years ago. He proposed a God whose love was so expansive that nobody was outside of the reach. He went as far as to state that he believes that God’s love is so great that there is no hell. Following the

publication of this book half of his large congregation walked out the door and the other half got together and fired him from the church he had planted. The idea that God can love those who we deem unlovable is very difficult for many people to accept. However any time we restrict who God can love we are trying to put God in a box that we have designed and God does not accept this.

In a post on Tuesday Jan 26 Richard Rohr wrote the following about our tendency to limit God:

“God is always so much bigger than the theological and churchy boxes we build for "him." Without recognizing it, many people have an operative image of God as Santa Claus. He's "making a list and checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty or nice." He rewards the good kids with toys (heaven) and punishes the bad kids with lumps of coal (hell). If you don't have a mature spirituality or an honest inner prayer life, you'll end up with a Santa Claus god, and the Gospel becomes a cheap novel of reward and punishment. That's not the great Good News! An infinitely loving God is capable of so much more than such a simplistic trade off or buy out.

Bringing social acceptability to Christianity has not helped in this regard. After Constantine made Christianity the established religion of the Roman Empire in 313, the great biblical concepts of grace and forgiveness gradually were controlled by formulas and technique. Empires cannot afford too much mercy or forgiveness. Soon the Church created equations: this much sin results in this many years in purgatory or hell; this much penance results in this much time released from purgatory. Grace and forgiveness became juridical and distant concepts instead of deep spiritual realizations. Disobedience or disloyalty were seen as much more sinful than any failure to love or serve or show mercy.”

Sadly this seems to be just as true if not more so today than in the past and I believe it is a major part of the problem facing Christianity today in our post modern world. Many people are focused on a narrow view of Christianity that seeks to restrict what God can do as Richard describes. And yes the sin is disloyalty. This puts an angry, fearful and to be blunt hate filled face on our faith rather than the open loving face of God that Jesus came to earth to show us. Just listen to what many are preaching regardless of the subject. The ultimate threat no matter the topic is that if you disagree, you're going to hell.

In verse 11 our passage today says: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” Viewing God in this narrow way is very childish. This harkens back to the small view of God that we see early in the Hebrew Scriptures where God is the God of Israel and nobody else. A tribal image of God is always a

childish image and Paul is calling us to put that aside and instead use the God of love that Paul creates for us. Where God doesn't just love us, but instead is love. Love is another name for God and for Jesus.

This becomes a problem when we have our relationship with God completely backwards. I again go to Richard Rohr and video that the Men's Spirituality Group is watching. In his section on atonement, how does Jesus save us he makes the radical and I think absolutely accurate statement that Jesus did not become incarnate, did not die on the cross to change God's mind about us. He did all this to change our mind about God. To move us out of a tiny mean spirited Santa Claus God to one who is the source of all that is and whose greatest trait is love. This is what Paul is talking about and I hope you will consider viewing God in this expansive loving view.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.