

September 12, 2010  
Rev. Dr. Steven H. Koski  
“The Wild, Extravagant Love of God”  
1 John 4.7-12, 19-21

In his book, When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough, Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of the factory that had a problem of employee theft. Valuable items were being stolen every day. So they hired a security firm to search every employee as he or she left at the end of the day. Most of the workers willingly went along with emptying their pockets and having their lunch boxes checked.

But one man would go through the gate every day at closing time with a wheelbarrow full of trash, and the exasperated security guard would have to spend a half-hour, when every one else was on the way home, digging through the food wrappers, cigarette butts, and Styrofoam cups, to see if anything valuable was being smuggled out. He never found anything.

Finally, one day, the guard could no longer stand it. He said to the man, “Look, I know you're up to something but every day I check every last bit of trash in the wheelbarrow and I never find anything worth stealing. It's driving me crazy. Tell me what you're up to and I promise not to report you.”

The man shrugged and said, “It's simple. I'm stealing wheelbarrows.”

Then Kushner goes on to say that “we totally misunderstand what it means to be alive when we think of our lives as time we can use in search of rewards and personal pleasure. Frantically and in growing frustration, we search through our days, our years, looking for the reward, for the success, for the comfort that will make our lives worthwhile, like the security guard looking through the trash

in the wheelbarrow for something of value and all the while missing the obvious answer. When you have learned how to live and learned that to live is to love, life itself is the reward.”

You’ve heard me say this 1000 times – “The things that are most important are always at the mercy of the things that are least important.”

Part of our problem today is that we’ve been seduced and bought the lie that everything matters – every activity, every phone call, every e-mail, every product, every event – and what happens is that which matters most gets lost and buried under that which matters least.

One of the challenges to living a meaningful and purposeful life is to be able to discern the difference and keep the main thing the main thing in life.

For the past few years, Martin Seligman and his colleagues have been working to unlock the elusive secrets of happiness. Seligman, founding Director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Authentic Happiness*, has found, not surprisingly, that the key to happiness appears to lie inside of us, and not in external things or events outside of us.

Researching more than 5000 diverse and varied people, the researchers found that happiness was strongly associated with what they labeled qualities of the heart or heart strengths like gratitude, hope, the capacity to forgive, compassion, the ability to love and be loved. Not surprisingly, topping the charts for happiness was love and service – knowing that your life is part of something more important than yourself.

As George Bernard Shaw put it so well, “The true joy in life is being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one.”

Greg reminded us last week that faith isn't about helping us be nice or be happy but it is an invitation into a worthy adventure – knowing our lives count and making our lives count – and the byproduct of giving ourselves to a purpose recognized as a mighty one is joy and knowing what it means to be truly alive.

Rally Sunday is the Sunday we remind ourselves and rally around what is most important...the day we make sure we don't miss the wheelbarrow for the trash...the day we listen individually and as a community for that invitation calling us, beckoning us, summoning us to be part of a mighty purpose.

Listen for that invitation in today's bible reading – “Beloved, love one another – for love is of God – every one who loves, knows God – every one who loves experiences God in the very depth of their being – for God is love.”

As we rally together for another exciting year of ministry and mission – recognizing what is most important in life is always getting lost and buried in what is least important, we remind ourselves that what is most important is LOVE. Love is the bottom line.

How simplistic and naïve that probably sounds. How strange that the bottom line is probably sound in the midst of all the other bottom lines competing for our energy and affections.

The financial world wants us to believe that the bottom line and key to security, peace and happiness is the size of our bank accounts.

The fashion and entertainment world has us convinced that it is the size and shape of our bodies that determines life's value and worth.

The retail world is quite good at assuring us that the bottom line is measured by the quality and quantity of our stuff – and whether or not we have the most recent and upgraded stuff.

For the real estate world, it is the size of our house, or in today's market, the bottom line is the value of our house.

Even in the retirement world of Central Oregon, the bottom line is measured by the personal pleasure you experience.

In the political world, the bottom line would appear to be fear and distrust of the “other.”

Yet, for those with ears to hear, the faint ancient whisper echoes from the pages of scripture – “Beloved, love one another – because love is of God – every one who loves knows God for God is love.”

In God's economy, the bottom line that matters the most is the quantity and quality of our love.

Jesus was asked by a scholar, out of the 600 plus commandments, which one is most important? Jesus said - Love. Love God with all your heart and soul and love your neighbor as yourself with the same passion and commitment.

What's most important? Jesus didn't say, “That you believe the right things.” What's most important? In a word, love. Not just any kind of love. The Greek word for love here is Agape. It is a love that transcends all other loves because it is ready to give itself totally, wildly and extravagantly, without hope or expectation of receiving anything in return. It is ready to give even at the risk of its own life, its own welfare, its own comfort and convenience.

That is Agape – love. That is God-love. That is the love revealed in Jesus...a love we call grace. That is the profound love God has for you. “We are able to love because God first loved us.”

The mystic Hafiz wrote about this unconditional agape kind of love, “even after all this time the sun never says to the earth, ‘you owe me’ ...look what happens with a generous, unconditional love like that – it lights the whole world.”

Even in the church we get off kilter in what we consider the bottom line. It’s funny to me when clergy get together it seems inevitable that the conversation always drifts to numbers –

How many members do you have? How many attend worship? What’s your budget? How many children and youth are part of your ministry?

Those conversations are about ego and fear, not about what matters most.

Now, of course, all of these numbers might in some way reflect our bottom line as a church, but they certainly do not define our bottom line.

We find our bottom line in our Bible reading – “Beloved, love one another, because love is of God...God is love.”

That’s our bottom line; because it’s God’s bottom line. In God’s economy, growing in membership doesn’t amount to a hill of beans if we haven’t loved well.

If I speak with the tongues of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or cymbal.

We can provide amazing programs for every age and stage of life – but are we a more loving congregation this rally day than we were at this time last year?

Have we grown in our capacity to love? Have we helped you grow in your faith in such a way that you have fallen deeper and deeper into God’s unconditional love for you? Have we helped you develop spiritual practices that equip you to live out of a place of love rather than a place of fear?

Are you a more loving, compassionate, justice seeking, peace making, forgiving person today than you were a year ago?

Are we known in the community for our great music, wonderful youth groups, beautiful sanctuary? Or, are we known for the way we love?

Because that’s our bottom line! As William Sloan Coffin said, ‘If we fail at love we fail at all things else.’ Or, to put a more positive spin on that, ‘When love wins, every one wins!’ Are we standing on the side of love?

As Jesus revealed to us the heart of God, our number one job and privilege is to bring God’s heart to the world.

As I often say to send you forth at the end of worship, ‘May the love of Jesus free you to love as extravagantly as Jesus did.’ Wouldn’t it be amazing to be known in this community, to be known in the world for the extravagance of our love?

Historians say the early church grew for two reasons – the development of roads AND the radical grace and love shown by the earliest followers of Jesus.

Their love for others stood apart from the culture around them. During the time of the plagues, as families fled abandoning their own family, it was the followers of Jesus who stepped in to care for the sick, to sit with the dying, always at the risk of their own lives. It was the followers of Jesus who cared for the widows and orphans. It was the followers of Jesus who welcomed the stranger and outcast.

Their love was so radical, extravagant and grace-filled, the culture would say to one another, “Look at how they love...I’ve never seen anything like that.” And the spirit of that love, a love that reflected the love of Jesus, drew people to be part of this movement.

What a stark contrast to the picture of Christianity portrayed this past week by Pastor Terry Jones and the Dove World Outreach Center as they threatened to burn copies of the holy Quran to commemorate 9/11.

I hesitate even bringing this up because I am frustrated by the way the media sensationalized this event. It would have been a nonevent if it wasn’t for the media choosing to make this important.

But here you have a pastor with a congregation of 50 garnering worldwide attention portraying Christianity to be about hate and prejudice. Pastor Jones is a child of God, like you and me, but has some wacky, fear-based theology I can only assume comes from a wounded soul. As Richard Rohr says, “Pain that is not transformed is transmitted.”

Such an act as burning the Quran is such a slap in the face of Jesus. If he followed through burning the Qurans, which I am so glad he hasn’t as of yet, they might as well burn some Bibles too, because they are already destroying the teachings of Jesus.

Jesus, the one who called his followers to be peacemakers. Jesus, the one who said we are to love not only our neighbors, but also our enemies. Jesus, the one who said we are to pray for those who persecute us. Jesus, the one who welcomed the foreigner and the outcast. Jesus, the one who said if you want to be great you must be willing to serve. Jesus, the one who looked in the eyes of those who crucified him and spoke words of forgiveness. Jesus, the one who said we are not just to forgive 7 times, but 70 times 7.

Because of the media coverage giving Pastor Jones his 15 minutes of fame, we heard a lot about this mockery of the Christian faith. We didn't hear anything at all from the media about a Jewish woman and a Christian woman, Susan Retik and Patti Quigley, who both lost their husbands in the 9/11 attacks. They commemorated the anniversary of that tragic day where hate changed their life forever by speaking in a mosque in Boston to recruit members of the mosque to join their battle against poverty and illiteracy in Afghanistan.

Both women were pregnant when their husbands died on Sept. 11 leaving them widowed with children who would never know their fathers. Their lives were devastated. They lived with the painful cost of hate. Finding strength in their faith, these two women realized that there were more than half a million widows in Afghanistan. They started an organization called beyond the 11<sup>th</sup> which has now assisted more than 1,000 Afghan widows helping them learn how to read and write and helping them in starting their own businesses. It's an effort both to help some of the world's neediest people (Afghanistan is the 2<sup>nd</sup> poorest country in the world and has one of the highest illiteracy rates) and it's an effort to fight back at the distrust and hatred that devastated their lives with the power of love and compassion.

So yesterday, to remember a day when hate changed their lives forever, Susan Retik, a Jew, and Patti Quigley, a Christian,

worshipped and shared a meal at a mosque with their Muslim brothers and sisters and encouraged them to join them in a mission of love.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God.

Jesus' whole life was a living witness to God's love, and Jesus calls his followers to carry on that witness in His name.

We, as followers of Jesus, are sent into the world to be visible signs of God's extravagant, unconditional love.

We are called, like the earliest followers, to live in such a way that those around can't believe it and look at one another and say, "See how they love."

In a world so torn apart by division, anger and hatred, in a world where so many are hurting, we have the privileged vocation to be living signs of a love that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds.

Love alone makes us what we were meant to be. Love alone transforms the world. Love alone will heal the world. Love is not some weak ideal, some soft, squishy, kumbaya emotion. Agape love is mightier than missiles and stronger than hate.

What's most important – love – not just any kind of love - but agape love – to love like Jesus.

That's our theme for the year – To Love Like Jesus.

There will be three areas we will try to focus on this year:

1. To help you experience and deepen your own experience of God's unconditional love – your own experience of yourself as Beloved. Henri Nouwen says the spiritual life begins when

- you begin to know yourself as beloved and you begin to recognize others as beloved children of God.
2. To embrace wholeheartedly the risky and worthy adventure of our call to love in all areas of our lives.
  3. To develop the skills and capacity to be more loving people.

We want to be able to recognize as individuals and as a community, 12 months from now, by focusing our energy and encouraging one another around what is most important that, ‘Yes, we have grown more into the likeness of Christ. Yes, we are more loving people.’”

Father Richard Rohr said the church has forever preached at people telling them what to do, telling them to love but has failed miserably in providing the spiritual practices where people experience themselves as Beloved. The church, Father Rohr said, has been great at telling people to love but has failed miserably in equipping people with the skills to love. The church has failed miserably, he says, in transforming our woundedness knowing where pain is not transformed it is transmitted.

If your faith has not somehow enlarged your life, increased your capacity to love, helped you know yourself as beloved, and given you the courage to love others, than we in the church have failed you.

There are two ways to live in this world, from a place of fear or from a place of love. We want to help you move from that place of fear to the place of love.

Beloved, love one another for love is from God...God is love. We are created in the image of God. That means our very essence, our truest nature is love. There is a piece of divinity dwelling with each and every one of us and we are invited to breathe that divinity into the world.

To love like Jesus...where do we begin? Maybe we begin by doing nothing spending time each day contemplating the nature of that love that dwells deep within us and claims us as beloved.

What do we do with those who don't understand that God is love...who won't dance to the rhythms of divine grace...who stay trapped in that place of fear?

Perhaps St. Teresa of Avila, the most influential female saint in the Christian world, has an answer.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a century full of religious bigotry, intolerance and violence, much like today, she wrote –

‘How did those priests ever get so serious  
and preach all that gloom?

I don't think God

Tickled them

Yet.

Beloved – hurry!’

Tickle them... and us...with grace...may it be so!