



**THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
MAY 17, 2020
“WHEN LOVE FINDS YOU”**

JOHN 14: 15-21

“If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.”

SERMON

I love playing with our band, SoulSpirit.

I love deb.

I love working in the yard.

I love my children.

I love chicken casino from Roma’s.

I love to box.

I love my work as a pastoral psychotherapist.

Some people love the pens, but I didn’t grow up with hockey, so I don’t know....

I love the people of clc.



I love people from my former congregations.

I love the Steelers.

I love Jesus.

I love our dogs, Hana and Lucas.

Love, love, love.

But we have only one word in the English language for love. Sanskrit, for example, has forty-two words for love. We even have thirteen words for a certain kind of sandwich: hero, submarine, hoagie, grinder, but only one word for love.

Most or many of us are governed by the idea of love as romantic love. Most of our popular songs are about falling in love, being in love, falling out of love, searching for a new love.

You were likely surprised when I mentioned that van Morrison did not write his song, "have I told you lately that I love you?" About his relationship with his wife or girlfriend, but about his relationship with God.

And that's a problem. When we're not in love with God, then every bit of our need to love and be loved gets placed on another human being. And no human being can bear that kind of emotional and spiritual weight.



And then we may unconsciously ask the other to love us unconditionally. Which no human can do or should do. Until very recent times, the language of unconditional love was reserved for our relationship with God.

Human relationships are about conditional love. Even as toddlers, we cannot be loved unconditionally. When our child gets out of bed for the fourth time to ask for another glass of water, we're not going to feel particularly loving. It will be progress not to feel really irritated.

Donald Winnicott, a pediatrician and psychotherapist coined the phrase "good enough" mother in order to calm anxious mothers. Anxious mothers carry the burden of thinking they need to perfectly love their children or else they will do immense damage. Yes, at birth, the mother needs to deeply attune to the child. But, eventually, the child must learn that the world doesn't really work that way. We will not get our needs responded to perfectly. Mothers just need to be "good enough."

The world will never revolve around our rearend.

No, just good enough. A good enough parent, spouse, employee, and so on. How about a "good enough" God? We ever think about that....?

This morning, let's look at love through two practical, psychological lenses.



Because when we start with spirituality—love the lord your God with all our heart and all your soul and all your mind and your neighbor as yourself—we are going to end up in psychology. And vice versa.

Because love is the biggest of subjects, I want to provide these two love lenses as just one contribution to the challenge of understanding spiritual love.

The lenses I will use describe what each of us needs from birth to death and, what we need to give another person from birth to death. And how to think about God and love. All in about fourteen minutes. Easy enough, right? No, but hopefully good enough.

First, let's talk about God and grace for a moment. Simply stated, we can have one of two basic views of God and grace. There is monkey grace and there is cat grace.

If you watch a mother monkey in the jungle, she is going to swing from branch to branch and tree to tree and the baby monkey needs to hold on. If the baby monkey does not hold on, the baby monkey is going to fall—splat—to the ground.

And this is how some people view God and grace. It's up to us to hold onto God by keeping his commandments and following the rules and hope that it pays off. I summarize it by: "I don't smoke and I don't chew and I don't go with girls that do."



Monkey grace emerges from the perspective that we need to make the first move by “being who God (and everyone else) wants us to be” and then God will bless us or be in our corner. Of course, this is only until we mess up and then—clunk—God drops us on our head.

Then there is cat grace. When the mother cat has her kittens, she carries them with her wherever she goes. If she moves from the barn to living under the front porch, she will grab the kitten in the her mouth by the scruff of its neck and take the kitten where she goes.

The mother makes the first move and makes sure that the kitten stays safely with her. The kitten can struggle to get away, the kitten can act up, but mama is going to haul that kitten right back into the fold.

If we live in cat grace, God makes the first move toward us, for us, with us, and keeps pursuing us relentlessly throughout our life. We cannot get loose and fall away.

This is why Lutherans and others baptize infants. Making this spiritual perspective visible. A baby cannot repent, cannot ask to be baptized, cannot make a confession of faith.

In fact, the baby can only load its diaper, pull on my moustache—as sometimes happens—cry up a storm, wiggle, and arch its back. Infant baptism depicts that God makes the first move into our life with a lifetime of love without one ounce of effort on the our part. God loves first because that is who God is. There is no fee of good behavior for entrance into the kingdom of God....



The first lens poses the question: do you see me?

In last week's gospel, Jesus says to Philip, "don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the father."

This is where we all begin. Each one of us has some opinion about God. And we assume that who we think God is who God is. But our initial image of God largely consists of the characteristics of our parents. They are our first gods and they form a God image in our soul.

But, by definition, God is unknowable. God exists above and beyond the created universe. This is why, if you want to know who God is, look at Jesus Christ. God in human form.

The bible is not a how-to manual. The bible is the cradle in which we find the Christ child.

Jesus Christ comes to us from the unseen spiritual world. He reveals to us the way of the spiritual journey and the universal human pattern of suffering, death, and resurrection. Pain, dying, and rising.



Our evolving spirituality must include some way of cleaning up our image of God through Jesus Christ.

As the Sufi poet, Rumi, writes: “your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it....”

As children, we need to be seen. We cannot see ourselves.

Parents, first, must see when we are hungry, when our diaper is wet, when we want to be held, when we need a nap, when we are too hot or too cold.

Tuning in means that the parents see that we like to be held this way and not that. That we like strained peaches, not strained prunes.

Although it may not feel like love to a child, all children need rules, discipline, and structure. Hands-off parenting puts the burden on the child to see themselves and to decide what is right behavior. This is an overwhelming and impossible task. It asks them to begin from nothing.

Rules, discipline, and structure allows the child to build an inner healthy container....

My parents saw that my sister and I had some natural music ability and so they provided piano lessons. And the rules, discipline, and structure continued. We had to practice—everyday. We had to develop discipline and structure to learn



how to play music. You cannot just sit down whenever you want to and fiddle around. We need others to show us the way. We need loving teachers and mentors. We need people outside our family to be on our side....

Again, the Olbert family is on the way to church one Sunday, stopped at a red light. I'm in the backseat and my mother turns to me and says, "you have everything it takes to be a Lutheran pastor." And then she turns back around.

I was stunned. Where did that come from? I just want to play rock and roll. A Lutheran pastor? No way.

But she saw me in ways that I could not see myself. This is love.

We show love to others by seeing them. The first time Steve Slepecki opened his mouth, I knew he had a lot to offer. At our first congregational council meeting he said, "clc knows how to be in the neighborhood for good, but we don't know how to be in the church for good." A brilliant assessment.

The more I saw of him, the more I knew that he had what it takes to be a pastor and so I started talking to him about it and now Steve has about finished his first year of seminary.



This is love. We see one another in ways that we cannot see ourselves. I see Steve as someone once saw me. There is a circle and cycle of love if we understand love.

And it's not always pleasant. We may need to tell someone what we are seeing in their negative behavior. In this case, we speak the truth in love as much as we can.

There is no me without thee. Loving relationship is about a mutual exchange of what we see in one another.

The second lens is the question: are you with me?

When we first think about God as children, God is out there, up there, God is at a distance. Being with God in this way becomes a matter of behaving so you can finally be with God in the next life.

Again, look at Jesus. Jesus comes to be with us. His first words are: the kingdom of God is in your midst. Falling on you. Even within you.

God is with us in the midst of this messy, confusing, even dangerous pandemic.



God is now. This moment. Relationally. But that does not mean that God is someone who fixes things for us....

As a chaplain in a hospital in South Carolina, the doctors would call on me when someone died in the emergency room.

I learned that I could be with the family of the deceased, but I could not do anything for them. Being in the moment with them was tough. So much pain, so much suffering, so much grief. Sometimes anger, sometimes hysterics. To hang in there and be present took inner discipline. Exhausting.

God is present in all the moments. Emmanuel—God with us.

Love is being with another person in their reality. Thinking and feeling your way into that person's experience. Finding ways to connect and communicate.

We do not need to agree, but we do need to closely listen. We do not need to fix anything. We just need to be fully present. Who said love is easy?

We also need to surround ourselves with people who know how to be present with us. If not, we continually will be misunderstood and hurt. Rather than strengthening our sense of self, our sense of self will be weakened and we will more easily fall apart emotionally.



Being with God is not about God doing something for us, but deepening into a relationship where we love and know we are loved.

Use this precious time during the pandemic to give in to the rhythm of these moments.

Really see the people around you. Show yourself as openly as you can so they might see you.

Be with the people around you. Ask them to be present to you. We may not have this present moment again. We surely will not have these moments again.

Connect to the circle and cycle of love.

SERMON SONG

WHEN LOVE FINDS YOU BY VINCE GILL