

Love Through the Eyes of God

3rd Sunday of Advent

Shepherd's Grace Church

December 16, 2012

Luke 3:7-18

⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." ¹⁰And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

**A group of professional people posed this question to a group of 4 to 8 year-olds ,
'What does love mean?'**

**The answers they got were broader and deeper than anyone could have imagined
See what you think:**

'When my grandmother got arthritis , she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore.. So my grandfather does it for her all the time , even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love.'

Rebecca- age 8

'When someone loves you , the way they say your name is different.

You just know that your name is safe in their mouth.' Billy - age 4

'Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other.' Karl - age 5

'Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.' Chrissy - age 6

'Love is what makes you smile when you're tired.' Terri - age 4

'Love is when my mommy makes coffee for my daddy and she takes a sip before giving it to him , to make sure the taste is OK.' Danny - age 7

'Love is when you kiss all the time. Then when you get tired of kissing , you still want to be together and you talk more. My Mommy and Daddy are like that. They look gross when they kiss' Emily - age 8

'Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.' Bobby - age 7 (Wow!)

'If you want to learn to love better , you should start with a friend who you hate , ' Nikka - age 6 (we need a few million more Nikka's on this planet)

'Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt , then he wears it every day.' Noelle - age 7

'Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well.' Tommy - age 6

'During my piano recital , I was on a stage and I was scared. I looked at all the people watching me and saw my daddy waving and smiling. He was the only one doing that. I wasn't scared anymore.' Cindy - age 8

'My mommy loves me more than anybody You don't see anyone else kissing me to sleep at night.' Clare - age 6

'Love is when Mommy gives Daddy the best piece of chicken.' Elaine-age 5

'Love is when Mommy sees Daddy smelly and sweaty and still says he is handsomer than Robert Redford .' Chris - age 7

'Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day.' Mary Ann - age 4

'I know my older sister loves me because she gives me all her old clothes and has to go out and buy new ones.' Lauren - age 4

'When you love somebody , your eyelashes go up and down and little stars come out of you.' (what an image) Karen - age 7

'Love is when Mommy sees Daddy on the toilet and she doesn't think it's gross..' Mark - age 6

'You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it , you should say it a lot. People forget.' Jessica - age 8

And the final one The winner was a four year old child whose next door neighbor was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry , the little boy went into the old gentleman's yard , climbed onto his lap , and just sat there. When his Mother asked what he had said to the neighbor , the little boy said , 'Nothing , I was just helping him cry'

Isn't it interesting to listen to some of the definitions of "love" as offered by youngsters? I wonder how they might differ from some of our definitions. If we were polled by the same group of people what would be our definitions of love? Here are some possibilities. "When the phone rings right in the middle of an important meeting and it your spouse calling. You answer and he/she wants to remind you to bring home something for dinner which you have already gotten earlier in the day." Or maybe, "you are working on a project in the yard or in the house that you had been trying to get to for a very long time. You have just gotten started and he/she calls from another place in the house and says, Honey, when you have a minute, could you come and help me. And you know he/she means right now!"

I started putting these lists together early in the week. My reflection on them at the time was one of innocent humor. I wanted to convey how at times for us humans, we become annoyed with those around us, with those whom we love the most. The list from the kids seems so funny because it is not the way we see ourselves. We paint toenails or kiss or bat our eyes because we feel a genuine affection for that one person we care about in the world more than anyone else! It must seem odd and comical to others to watch us with those whom we love, with those whom we are most comfortable. It must also seem comical to watch us in our frustration as we put aside the very thing we want to be doing most at a particular moment to accommodate the person we love. We've already gotten the groceries, we are having an important conversation, we are right in the middle of what we want to be doing and that one we love calls out to us...we react, maybe first out of frustration, but finally out of love...and it can seem comical!

On Friday, all that changed! Now these lists, these thoughts, these most mundane expressions seem like some of the most important gestures we can make to those whom we care about so deeply. Suddenly, how precious it is for us to be able to express to our children the great love we have for them. How important it is for us to be around them, to have them close, to hear their voices and their laughter and to be silly with them! We don't care if they think it is gross or uncomfortable...we have come to recognize in just an instant just how fragile life can be...just how precious life can be...just how fleeting life can be. Now, our comic interpretation of life and love brings with it a stark reality. Presence is not perpetual. Presence is not guaranteed! Presence is not to be taken for granted!

We humans tend to love in human terms. Love will be easy, it will be neat, it will be quick, it will be gratifying for us! We struggle when it gets messy and hard! We struggle when we are sometimes forced to put others ahead of ourselves. I believe this is exactly where our text for this morning meets us and calls us back to reality! The lesson that comes out of the mouth of John the Baptist today is not a lesson about criticism, it is not a lesson about guilt or shame...it is a lesson about love! John wants us to learn about love through God's eyes. He does not invite us to love in the way that God loves, but rather to appreciate the incredible gift of God's love and prepare to receive it...John invites us to Christmas. Our task in this moment is not to do something, but to allow something. We are not called to love as God loves, we are called instead to receive what God gives.

John says to those who come out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers, who told you to flee from the wrath that is to come." In Luke's gospel, John is not talking to the Pharisees or to the political elite as he has perhaps in Mark or Matthew. Here, John is talking to everyone who comes out! Those who have come out are fleeing from the events of the day. They are fleeing from Roman persecution, from political oppression, from violence and evil. They are looking for something more. They hear a voice crying out in the wilderness and they think perhaps this could be the voice of freedom they long for so desperately in their lives!

John is talking to us! We are the brood of vipers! Vipers are snakes and when they sense danger they flee to a safer place if one is available. In the same way we come to worship. We come to seek safety from the stresses of our daily lives, from the oppressions and problems that seem to overwhelm us! We come from our homes and from our daily lives. We come from a beaten and battered and broken world and we long to flee from the wrath that wraps our world in evil. Especially today...especially today, we come. We come in the face of violence and a crime so heinous we cannot still comprehend it. In the face of the senseless tragedy of Newtown, Conn., we come. Like a brood of vipers we come! John's voice calls us and God's voice does indeed have a word for us! In His word, God reveals five things.

The first thing God reveals is PROMISE! Is. 54: 10-- For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you—Promise. The wrath that is to come may destroy the world! It may take the lives of the innocent, even innocent children, because evil and the potential for evil will continue to exist in the world. Ultimately however, all that will be destroyed! All that oppresses us and overwhelms us will depart, but as Jesus says, "my word will never depart!" God's love will remain with us and will not depart from us! This is his promise to us and we can flee to that promise, even in times of despair and devastation in the world! God does not ask us to act on this promise, instead God insists that we wait, that we watch, that we wonder at how this promise will be revealed and carried out! In the face of the horror of Friday, we are called to the new reality of Sunday. In the face of crucifixion and death, we are called to resurrection and new life! In the face of God's promise of steadfast love, we are called to flee from the wrath of the world not to love as God loves, but to receive what God gives!

Another thing God reveals is PRACTICE! 1Cor. 13: 13 reminds us that "Faith, Hope, and Love remain, these three. And the greatest of these is Love." In the world, we can have faith. Faith is the evidence of things hoped for, the promise of things not seen. (Heb. 11.1) As we live in the world, we can trust God's promise as an evidence of a future God has provided for us. Even in the midst of tragedy, we can trust this promise and reluctantly, regretfully, in the wake of evil and oppression we can continue to step into a future. We step into this future filled with trust and there we meet our God who has prepared for us a possibility beyond anything we can imagine. While we live in the reality of Friday, we look to the wonder of Sunday and we step forward in faith.

Hope is not idle speculation but rather it is joyful expectation. (Romans 5.1) Trusting God, we expect a world that will be made right somehow. We cannot see it, for we see through a mirror lit dimly, but God sees it. He sees face to face and he knows fully and He always has! We live in a world filled with violence and unexplained action, but in our human condition, we hope.

Faith and hope are human emotions. They exist for us as a transition into God's kingdom. Love, however transcends our human condition and reveals God in God's purest form. God is Love! As we receive this love fulfilled in God's promise, we are forced...yes forced to an action we could never have

anticipated. Filled with God's promise, we can do nothing but respond. We practice that love in the way John invites us to practice this morning. "From now on, whoever has two coats must...yes must! Give one to the one who has none." God give his promise and asks us to receive it, then God fills us with such abundance that we are overwhelmed, no longer by the oppression and persecution in the world, but by all we have even in spite of it! Out of the abundance, not of what we have accumulated, but of what God has given, we share! In the face of disasters like Newtown and even in the face of those in great need right here in our community, we practice what God gives. We love! Love through God's eyes is not a reduction in our abundance, but a realization that love produces love and as we are filled with that love, we can do nothing but give it away. God's gift to us as we near Christmas is a realization of this love and an invitation to be filled with it so that we can put it into practice.

Another word from God this morning is PRECIPICE. Psalm 33: 18-- Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love—Precipice . We must know this morning, especially this morning, that God's word will call us right to the edge of our existence. Those brave teachers and administrators in Newton experienced the edge of existence on Friday and they answered in Love! In the face of evil in its most recognizable form, they responded with courage and with the knowledge of God's promise that there is life beyond this life. In our day to day lives, we may, prayerfully we will never be tested in the way these men and women were tested, but we will be pushed to the very edge of our faith. From there, we are invited to receive God's greatest gift!

The tax collectors asked John, "what should we do." John answered, collect only what is prescribed. John knew he was asking them to give up a significant portion of their income. He also knew this portion was gained illegitimately. The precipice they were invited to was one of integrity. They were called to act with dignity, not because of what they could do, but in the face of all God was giving. We too are called to that kind of integrity. We are called to walk to the very edge of our existence and recognize that there are things important even beyond this life. How will we respond? The precipice will test our faith, but beyond it is the fullness of God's promise.

A fourth word God gives us this morning is PURPOSE! Psalm 109: 4-- In return for my love they accuse me, even while I make prayer for them.—Purpose. As we wait and watch and wonder in this Advent season, we must also recognize that not all are waiting. Some have rejected the possibility of God. Even in the face of overwhelming evidence of God's existence and involvement in the world, there are those who will deny or even accuse God. They will say, "If there is a God where was God on Friday." They will demand that God justify the actions taken by one individual. Eli Weisel, a Jewish theologian wrote, "It took me a long time to understand that my enemies were not God's enemies and it took even longer for me to understand that even God's enemies were not God's enemies." Love through God's eyes invites us to see all the world as worthy of Love! God does not hate and God does not have enemies! God has a plan for the created world and in the fullness of time God will has revealed that plan. The plan is Jesus Christ, our redemption, our great gift of God's perfect love. Until all have heard the good news of Christ,

we are called to God's purpose; prayer. We cannot do anything on our own to hasten Christ's coming. Christmas will not get here one day sooner because we want it. Our purpose is to pray. As we receive God's love, we are called to pray for those who have not yet heard the good news. "Even now...even now! The winnowing fork is in his hand and he is separating the wheat from the chaff!" There must be an urgency in our prayer so that all may hear God's good news! Prayer, even for those who would speak against us, or do evil to us...that is our purpose!

Finally, God has this word for us. PRESENTS, PRESENCE! John 3: 16-- 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.— Presents, Presence! The one who comes is our gift from God! God did not have to give this gift, God chooses to give this gift! We call it grace. In God's grace we experience the Gift of Christmas and Christ. The purpose of this gift is for our redemption, not for our judgment. Love through God's eyes invites us to move beyond what we can do and to recognize what God is doing.

Last week I was not with you in worship. As you started worship, I was 13 miles into a 26.2 mile run. When I started the run they had a video filmed of each runner. We were asked why we run. I answered glibly with the response that "I run because I like to eat." There is truth to that. I do run to keep my weight down and to enjoy some of the foods I really like, but during the race, my motivation changed.

As we started the run, we ran past the Dealy Plaza. This place memorializes the events of November 23, 1963. I was briefly reminded of the tragedy of that day, but it struck me even in that moment that the memorial build had helped overcome the tragedy. People were encouraged to move into a future. It would be a different future, but it was a future filled with promise. Today as I share this image with you, I am even more mindful that there will be a future with promise. We do not know what that future will look like, but we are called to step into it with boldness and confidence, knowing it will be richer and more incredible than anything we can imagine, even in the face of Friday! We will move forward...even as I moved forward in my run.

I ran on down a hill and across the Trinity River bridge. On the other side of the bridge was what we might call a less desirable section of Dallas. As I ran through South Dallas, I saw buildings in need of repair and many empty spaces where buildings had been torn down. I was struck by the stark contrast with the new buildings I had seen on the other side of the river. I was also struck by the people who greeted us from this section of town. There were Mexican Bands with guitars and maracas. The players were enthusiastic and encouraging! As we continued down the hill we came past an African American Gospel Choir singing church hymns. As we passed, they stood as if intentionally and just for me and they shouted "Glory Halleluiah!" It was almost as if they could see their future and I was a part of it.

Almost immediately after I passed the choir, we turned and headed uphill. As we climbed the long steady hill, we crossed the river again, this time on the new bridge, a bridge representing a new future

spanning the past and inviting the present into even greater possibilities. We ran on through the nicer sections of downtown Dallas, by fancy restaurants and hotels and by a park that had been built over a freeway! We headed into some of the nicer residential areas and at about five miles into the run we came to Shriner's Hospital. There, the children who were patients in the hospital lining the streets. Behind them were their parents with signs saying, "Run so my child can live," and "Run so my child can too!" There were many other slogans on the signs, all reminding us that all the proceeds from the marathon went to support the hospital.

Suddenly, I realized that all the enthusiastic support from the bands and volunteers was for a greater purpose. The people who were volunteering were not volunteering for me, they were volunteering for the children. I moved over to the right side of the street and gave high 5's to as many of the kids as I could and as I touched them, I received an energy that transcended the moment. I changed the focus of my run. I was no longer running for myself or something as mundane as a good meal. I was running because I had been given a gift of good health and was invited to share it!

My run was a struggle. At about mile 13 I started to dehydrate and really had to fight to keep going. I passed by White Rock Lake and the beautiful marina there and continued moving forward, but I was growing weaker with each step. At mile 18 I received a text...yes, a text while I was running. It was from Rochelle. She said she and the kids were on their way down and were looking forward to seeing me run by. I told her not to hurry, that I was struggling. She sent a reply back, "Hang in there, baby!" I continued to run.

Determined not to let the kids see me walking I ran through mile 18 and 19 and 20 and 21 not knowing where they might find me, the memories of the hospital now pushed far to the back of my mind. I passed mile 22 and then at mile 23, Rochelle and Amanda, my youngest daughter, stepped out of the crowd and came out to run with me. Chelle ran as far as I have ever seen her run and left me when we caught up with the rest of the family. Amanda stayed with me all the way to the end of the race. Her presence inspired me to keep running. Her love and that of my family kept me going to the completion.

This Advent season, God is sending His presence to us in many glorious ways. The acts of this past week may tempt us to quit. The evil that evidences itself in the world may cause our pain to seem overwhelming, but God invites us through the gift of redemption that He wants us to keep on, even when we think we can not!

Love through God's eyes invites us to experience Advent through Promise, Practice, Precipice, Purpose, and Presence. We are not called to love as God loves, but to receive what God gives. I invite you to receive God's love and I know you will be amazed and how much of it you will want to share!

May the one who has begun a good work in you see it through to completion in this Advent season!
Amen!