

April 26, 2020

*Precious Love*

Shepherd's Grace Church

17 If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. <sup>18</sup>You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, <sup>19</sup>but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. <sup>20</sup>He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. <sup>21</sup>Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

22 Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. <sup>23</sup>You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. <sup>24</sup>For

'All flesh is like grass

and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers,

and the flower falls,

<sup>25</sup> but the word of the Lord endures for ever.'

That word is the good news that was announced to you. (1Peter 1: 17-25)

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. <sup>2</sup>Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. <sup>3</sup>Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>5</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' <sup>6</sup>He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. <sup>7</sup>That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. <sup>8</sup>But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' <sup>11</sup>So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. <sup>12</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. <sup>13</sup>Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. <sup>14</sup>This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. <sup>15</sup> When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' <sup>16</sup>A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' <sup>17</sup>He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. <sup>18</sup>Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' <sup>19</sup>(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.(John 21: 1-19)

In light of all that has been going on in the world, Easter almost seems like a distant memory doesn't it. Since Easter Sunday, we have witnessed the sickness of thousands of people...witnessed them as numbers on a page, perhaps far removed from us here, perhaps disconnected because so many have fallen sick in other countries or in states we know little about. Even so, the connection is apparent in our daily lives. It stands in front of us as a constant reminder that since Easter much has changed!

Today, because of the fallen sick, we stand separated. We practice "social distancing" so we can eradicate the silent nemesis that continues to plague our society and even our world; threatening every one of us to the point that each of us must stand separately, committed to the community of humanity.

Our journey since Easter has been a challenge, hasn't it? We have learned that separation is not easy. We have learned that we need to be around one another and we have learned that when we are too long apart, we do start to experience a sort of separation anxiety.

I commented to Rochelle this week that I believed I was noticing a different tone from some friends posting on my facebook page. It seemed that a few were starting to tire of the task we were committed to together. It seemed

some started to question our need to stay separated and as a result, turned to question the validity of the authority that was keeping us separated.

Many of those questioning our current “shelter in place” order were claiming constitutional grounds. They wanted to suggest that we as individuals have rights that outweigh the responsibility we have to the rights of others. They want to claim the government has violated their rights as individuals. The people I am referring to want to suggest that my rights to do what I want supercede your right as an individual to do what you want and that the government is responsible for regulating those rights. We can argue and debate this if you want, however I want to invite you, to invite us to consider a higher authority this morning and what that authority is inviting us to do.

I believe the Easter Season as part of the church calendar is the perfect opportunity to consider this question. Easter is a season of new life and new life gives us the pause we need in order that we might reflect on our old life. Easter offers a promise of hope that was somehow missing in our old life. It lets us look beyond the here and now and instead, imagine a there and then that will be different. All of this is true, but there is more.

In addition to the Easter season, there is the current and present reality. We, at least we who are here in Kansas, find ourselves very really “sheltered in place.” We are instructed by the authorities whom we have chosen and by the experts they have sought out that the best way for us to overcome this menace is to stay separated from one another as much as possible.

If we look at the legal questions involved, some can argue that government has no authority to prevent us from opening our businesses, going shopping, watching movies, eating in restaurants or any other activity that causes us to come in contact with one another.

Others will argue that the government has an absolute right and responsibility to restrict our movement in order to provide for the common defense against this virus which threatens us all! Their argument is that we must protect ourselves from each other so we can end the threat to all. This morning I want to attempt to move beyond these secular arguments and invite you to consider Easter!

Last week, in John 20, Jesus breathed on the entire gathering in the upper room. Can you imagine what reaction that would cause if it happened in today’s environment? People would be scrambling around the room looking for hand sanitizer and sanitary wipes! We would be aghast! Where has he been? Do we need to be tested? Are we at risk? Receiving the Holy Spirit would be the last of our concerns. Still, we are called to believe!

I was out for a run this last Friday while I was thinking about this message. As I ran, I ran around our lake in Augusta. I could imagine the disciples as John described them in this morning's passage. I could see them away from the shore and I could imagine them having caught nothing. In fact, as I run, I come upon many people fishing from the shore and I holler out at them as Jesus does. I ask how they are doing and most answer that they have caught nothing. Fishing is easy. Apparently, catching fish is not.

Anyway, I came upon a group gathered on the shore. It was a large group and I was running with Oliver, our big black dog. I saw the group from some distance and I started looking for places to move over where I could pass from a safe distance. I did not do this because of "social distancing," I did it because I always move over as I pass people when I run with the dog.

He is big, and he is very friendly and he likes to jump on people or bark loudly so I move over to minimize his intrusion. On this particular occasion, the group was so large that there was no place to move and stay on the path. Oliver and I moved off the path and passed the group. As we did so, we noticed that they were not observing any kind of social distancing practice. Now, perhaps, they were a large family gathering for an opportunity to fish and catch up together but I remember as they watched me, they seemed to feel uncomfortable.

As the disciples went out to fish, they felt very comfortable with one another. They knew each other well and the closeness of the situation did not seem to bother them. All night they fished in close proximity and even though they caught nothing, they were not anxious with one another.

The people I met were not anxious either. As long as they were by themselves, they were perfectly fine. It wasn't until I approached that they became uncomfortable. Just as when Jesus distanced himself from the disciples on the shore and called out to them, they became uncomfortable and concerned. They were not concerned with each other but they were concerned with an outsider. They trusted each other. They did not trust an outsider.

At this point, we find an intersection between John and Peter this morning. In Peter's message to the scattered Christians and Jews to whom he is writing, he reminds them that they do not know God very well and that they should remember some things about him.

I find it interesting that it is Peter who reminds the scattered of their lack of knowledge of the Lord. Peter, the one who denied him, abandoned him, and scattered with the others at the crucifixion, this Peter is reminding the diaspora Christians and Jews that they need to know about God.

Perhaps it is exactly because of Peter's past relationship with God that he is so qualified to enter a conversation with others to whom he is bearing witness. Perhaps because Peter has discovered the depth and width and height and breadth of God's love for him, he can remind others now of the kind of relationship they can expect from God.

Isn't it true for each of us that we tend to speak of our relationship with God based on our own? We tend to let others know about the power of God's deeds because we have seen that same power. Today, as we share this Easter message, we should remember some of these things. For some, they are so dramatic as to be life saving. Some have experienced cures to illness. Some have experienced tragic accidents and miraculous rescue. For some, the power God has revealed to us has been more subtle. We have watched as He repaired a broken relationship or restored hope in our lives as we heard a story of what He had done for others.

In any case, we tend to speak of God based on the experience we have had and not on the experience of others. The discomfort and difficulty Peter has had with his own level of trust in God is on display today as we witness his reminder to those who have been scattered.

Last week, Peter told them about the mighty and powerful deeds of God. This week, Peter calls upon them to invite that power into their lives. His first admonition to them is to remember that because of what they have inherited through the resurrection of Christ, they are all children of God. As children, they can call God father. As children, we can call God Father.

Peter's warning, however is that if we are going to call Him father, we must remember all that means! In John 8, Jesus tells the Priests and Pharisees that to call out to God as Father means that we have a respect for God just as we do for our earthly fathers. We cry out to him as Abba, daddy. In that cry we hope that He will come to us and be an ever present strength in time of need. Not all, however are invited to call out to God as Father. Some, because they do not want to know God's message call out to Satan as father and find that his power does not provide the power they need. His is a worldly power where the power of God is an eternal one, present even before the foundations of the world!

If you are going to invoke this kind of power, Peter says, you must be aware of what you are asking. God the Father is not invoked as a power for only your pleasures and desires. Peter reminds them, and us that God as father always judges with absolute impartiality! God does not only remember the pious gestures of the Pharisees and Priests and grant them what they want.

God does not only remember the gifts given to the poor in order to impress. God remembers the heart of that action.

Because God remembers the heart of the actor, God judges based on what is in the heart and while some may still tremble, the good news is that God remembers all of this in a particular way. We should be fearful of God's memory. Our fearfulness, however should not be about our actions but about our heart. We must be reverent, Peter says so we can remember how God remembers!

I am including all of us in this conversation because Peter is not simply speaking to the scattered of his day. He has been one of them and he knows who they are. Peter is also speaking to us, the scattered of this day, the isolated, the alienated, the abandoned, the frustrated. Peter wants to remind us that we are to stand aware that our prayers to "Our Father" are not heard based on our ability to come to God, but on how we come.

We can only come through Christ. There is no other way that God can receive our prayer. God must look through Christ in order that He can see us as worthy of the inheritance which He has given. Apart from Christ, all God can see in us is sin. That is why the Priests and Pharisees had such a difficult time coming to Christ. They could not receive His gift and believe in him for who he is! They could only beat their chest and rest on their own laurels. (Luke 18)

God, Our Father hears our prayers based on our willingness to accept and believe in Jesus Christ as our savior. This Father knows that everything we have ever done in our past and everything we will do in our future will be unworthy of God's attention except that it be done through the power and the love of the one who took all our sins to the cross with him.

Our fear is not a cowering fear of a vengeful God! Instead, our fear is that we might forget, even for a moment the power of the one to whom all the praise and glory belongs! We must live in this fear, the fear not that God will withdraw His promise, but that we might forget the full measure of it!

When we remember all of it, we remember that we are indeed ransomed from the power of death, a death which we deserve, and that we are ransomed not by anything we have done but by everything God has done for us in Jesus Christ! It is not gold or silver, things of this world which save, but the precious blood of Jesus as Peter says!

This morning, God wants us to know that HE judges. All of us will be judged and all of us will be found unworthy, for all have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God. However, even in our unworthiness, we have been made worthy

by the power of the one who was prepared to make us worthy even before the foundations of the world.

God judges with absolute impartiality. He does not look at the actions of one moment in time. Instead, he looks at all our actions and measures them against the desires of our heart. Those actions will always be found wanting unless the desire of our heart is to receive Jesus. As God recognizes in this desire, the authentic nature of our heart, he sees in us, not the hope we have in our works, but the hope we have in our faith; a faith based on trust of God, the God who raised Jesus from the dead and gave Him glory!

Our judgment cannot be based on our actions. We must know there can be no action that will overcome the sin that exists in our lives. For this reason, we must put all our hope in the faith we have in Jesus Christ and in His amazing grace. No other action can be sufficient. As Peter says, "through Him and only through Him can we trust God just as He trusted God and God raised him from the dead!

In this trust our faith is justified and our sights are set on God! Once our sights are set on God and our life becomes a commitment to God alone, we find ourselves being purified, again, not by our actions but by the actions of Christ, actions God can look through to see us as Christ wants God to see us; worthy to stand in His presence knowing the truth!

This obedience to the truth can yield only one conclusion. All of us are in this together. The obvious reference to these words bring us to this time, to this Easter time where we must recognize that indeed government does give credence to both sides of the argument regarding human rights and the current pandemic.

Government does protect the rights of the individual. We have the rights to free speech and the rights to live and move and exist in society without others inhibiting those rights. We have the right to work and prosper and do well and enjoy the fruits of our labors.

Government also has the responsibility to protect the safety and security of the many. If you do not believe this, try getting into your car and driving down the road at whatever speed you want. At some point in your journey, you will find yourself faced with a government official inhibiting your progress with a speeding ticket. What right does the government have to give you a ticket? The same right to protect the safety of others that it is invoking temporarily during this pandemic.

So, how do we, a people of Easter respond? How does God call us to be different? "By our obedience to the truth, we have come to know a mutual love! We are called to love deeply in our hearts." With Easter so near and with the example of Jesus so clear, this love is not hard to remember. It is however difficult to practice.

Let me share a story. There was a man driving down a dark road on a cold rainy night. As he drove, he came upon a car stranded in the rain. The driver was an elderly woman and she had a flat tire. There was no other traffic on the road and the man, moved with compassion for the driver stopped to help.

The woman, quite concerned as she saw the man slow down, wondered what kind of person this stranger was. She became frightened that he might mean her some harm. Quickly, she locked the doors and moved away from the glass.

As the man approached, he saw the woman's apprehension. Appreciating her concern, he offered words of encouragement. He said, "stay in your car and open your trunk. I will change your tire and you will never have to leave the safety of the car."

The woman, having no phone and no ability to call for help agreed. She stayed in the car while the man found her jack. She watched and listened as the man sloshed in the mud and got down on hands and knees to find the place under the car to place the jack. She knew how dirty he must be getting and how wet. She was moved with pity for the work he was doing on her behalf.

Finally, the man was able to jack up the car and change the tire. When he finished, she noticed he wiped the mud off her tools and replaced them as he had found them in the trunk along with her damaged tire.

Moved with gratitude, the woman rolled down the window and said to the man, "how much can I pay you for your work and your kindness? The man insisted that she could not pay him anything. He was happy to help. He said, "others have helped me and tonight it was my turn to help you." He said, "perhaps someday you will have a chance to help someone. If you do, remember me. My name is Brian Anderson."

The woman again thanked the man for his help and for his kindness. She drove off and as she traveled down the road, she came upon a late night diner. She decided to stop in for a cup of coffee. There she came upon a waitress who was very pregnant. The waitress was kind and courteous. She went out of her way to help the elderly lady.



Moved with compassion for this kind young waitress, the woman thought, "I have been blessed this day with kindness from two very different people. I can see this woman works at a job where she cannot make very much money and I have plenty."

The elderly woman received the check from the waitress and pulled money out of her purse. She left a \$10 bill on top of the ticket with a note that she did not need the change. Underneath the bill, the woman tucked another five \$100 bills. She then left the restaurant before the waitress could see what she had done. As she left, she said a silent prayer of thanks for Brian Anderson.

When the waitress came back to get the ticket, the elderly lady was long gone. The woman saw the tip and was overcome with emotion. Later that evening she arrived back at her home. Her husband was already in bed and as she slipped in beside him, she gave him a silent kiss. She thought to herself, "I know how much you have been worried about money and how we were going to make it through the weeks ahead. Tonight, our prayers were answered. The money we need was provided. Sleep well tonight, Brian Anderson!"

The truth of Easter does not lie in government, the government that protects individual rights or in government that provides for protection of all citizens by limiting those rights. The truth of Easter lies in knowing mutual love, the kind of love that allows for God's amazing grace to be made known in simple gestures of love that come from deeply inside our hearts.

This week, my friend Steve returns from his time in New York. While there, he has helped hundreds of people find new life. Also this week there was a man who fell and another who stopped to help him up. Steve helped hundreds. The man who helped, only found one. In God's eyes, the actions were both the same. They were actions that came from a deep love, a love we are invited to have for one another.

It is that kind of love that will strengthen us for the days and weeks ahead. It is that kind of love that will remind us that we do not "shelter in place" for ourselves but we do it for one another so that not another person will have to endure the sickness of this pandemic. It is that love that invites us to be comfortable with others, even strangers.

We do not obey rules that are in place because we have to...we obey because we choose to. We obey because it is Easter and we remember the love of One who chose to die so we all might live. We obey because we are born into a new life through an imperishable seed, the living and enduring word of God! A word that will not fail! A word of Precious Love! Amen!