

It's All About Love

John 14:15-21

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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In 2007 a book by Wm. Paul Young was published. It was titled *The Shack*. This book tells the story of Mack, who after unimaginable tragedy, had an encounter with God who showed up, literally, as three persons. While we might call this the Trinity, Mack knew them as Papa described as “a big black woman with a questionable sense of humor” (Wm. Paul Young, *The Shack*, Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007; 88-89), Sarayu who “seemed almost to shimmer in the light and her hair blew in all directions even though there was hardly a breeze” (Young, 84), and Jesus who “appeared Middle Eastern and was dressed like a laborer” (Young, 84).

In one scene Mack had gone to wash up for dinner when he heard a crash come from the kitchen. Young writes, “For a moment there was dead silence, and then unexpectedly, [Mack] heard uproarious laughter. Curious, he exited the bathroom and poked his head through the doorway of the kitchen.

“Mack was shocked at the scene in front of him. It appeared that Jesus had dropped a large bowl of some sort of batter or sauce on the floor, and it was everywhere. It must have landed close to Papa because the lower portion of her skirt and bare feet were covered in the gooey mess. All three were laughing so hard that Mack didn't think they were breathing. Sarayu said something about humans being clumsy and all three started roaring again. Finally, Jesus brushed past Mack and returned a minute later with a large basin of water and towels. Sarayu had already started wiping the goop from the floor and cupboards, but Jesus went straight to Papa and, kneeling at her feet, began to wipe off the front of her clothes. He worked down to her feet and gently lifted one foot at a time, which he directed into the basin where he cleaned and massaged it....

“As he leaned against the doorway watching, Mack's mind was full of thoughts. So this was God in relationship? It was beautiful and so appealing. He knew that it didn't matter whose fault it was - the mess from some bowl had been broken, that a dish that had been planned would not be shared. Obviously, what was truly important here was the love they had for one another and the fullness it brought them. He shook his head. How different this was from the way he treated the ones he loved!” (Young, 104-105).

Oh how often we struggle to really grasp what love is...what possibilities live within love.

How often we are so quick to wonder who is in charge and who should be excluded rather than seeing the possibility of all that could be.

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That sense of hierarchy and even exclusion is certainly how this passage that we read today from John is too often used.

Too often we have been trained to listen for and fear the phrases about obedience.

Too often we have been taught that when Jesus says, "Those who love me will be loved by my Father" it means that we are part of an exclusive group that leaves others outside of God's love.

But, friends, do you know what the context of this passage is here in the Gospel of John? Do you remember?

This isn't some sermon Jesus is preaching to a various group of strangers on a hillside somewhere. Rather these are words shared within the intimate relationship between Jesus and his disciples. And not only that, but they are words shared in the last week of his life. Jesus is not forcing their obedience or threatening them with what happens if they don't love him. Rather, as he anticipates the reality of his own death, he is reminding them of his love and promising them that they will not be alone.

The relationship is already established. Jesus is speaking to people who know him and who love him and, who in spite of their imperfections, really are doing their best to live in his ways.

He is speaking to them knowing that he won't be with them forever...in fact, at this point in the story, he won't be with them in just a few days. And yet, he wants them to know that he will never really leave them.

Isn't that the power of love? So often, when presiding at a funeral service, I remind people that even though their loved one is no longer physically present, they will always be a part of them. I remind people that their loved one will keep showing up in the ways that they live out that person's legacy.

In a sense, that is what Jesus is doing here. And, meanwhile, this is even bigger as Jesus says that they will not only have the memory of him, but that his presence will remain with them. In the many manifestations of the divine, Jesus will keep showing up for them and with them and in them and through them.

Here in this reading love and keeping commandments and the presence of God are all entangled. We sometimes want to separate them, to put each in its own little box with its own specific definition. But the reality is that they are in fact entangled.

When Jesus reminds his followers to keep his commandments, what is he speaking of? Some of us talked about this last Sunday in Faith Formation. When asked what law was most important, what commandment needed to be kept, Jesus' answer came easily - it was love. Love of God and love of neighbor.

When we obey God, we don't adhere carefully to arbitrary rules, but when obey God, we love. When we keep Jesus' commandments, we create a better world for all. And when we do this, we not only more fully engage relationships with other people, but we more fully engage in relationship with the divine.

And that is the invitation. It was the invitation to Jesus' followers as he was about to depart, as he was promising that the divine presence would not leave them.

It is the invitation to us today, as we are reminded that God is love and that we are always invited and desired in God's circle of Love.

Again quoting from the book *The Shack*: "'Mack,' said Papa with an intensity that caused him to listen very carefully, 'we want to share with you the love and joy and freedom and light that we already know within ourself. We created you, the human, to be in face-to-face relationship with us, to join our circle of love'" (Young, 124).

Friends, I wonder how we would function differently in this world, in all of our relationships, if we understood love and joy and freedom, not hierarchy and rules and control, to be vital to everything we do, to how we relate to God and how we relate to one another.

I wonder how our world would be different if we could embrace the reality of the divine presence always with us, calling us to fuller living and to deeper loving.

In describing a vision she had in 1373, Julian of Norwich wrote of this little thing she saw lying in the palm of her hand. After other wonderings, Julian writes this, "In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it."

The same is true of us. God made us. God loves us. God keeps us.

I wonder what the world would be like if we embraced that truth in ourselves and in each one. I wonder what the world would be like if we were to truly join in God's circle of love.

Amen.