

Devotions – November 1-7, 2015
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Sunday, November 1, 2015

Text: Mark 12:28-30 (NIV)

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’”

It sounds so easy doesn't it? Love God with all that you have and all that you are. No exceptions.

What about those times in your life when things do not turn out the way you thought they would or should? You did not pass the test you studied diligently for. The promotion that you were well qualified for went to someone else. Your child (or someone else's child) dies. Your best friend (spouse or partner) leaves you for some inexplicable reason. A loved one receives a diagnosis with no cure and with no hope for a “better” tomorrow.

It is easy to love when things are going well. It is difficult to love when calamity strikes. Whenever I think about God's love, I am often brought back to the Hebrew word for love which is the same word for commitment. When Jesus commands us to love God – I believe there is another deeper meaning imparted here. God is demanding that we are committed as well. When love falters, commitment takes over. When commitment begins to feel like a burden and resentment develops, love can once again take front and center. When love and commitment work together, Shalom resides.

Loving God with all our heart, mind and soul does not mean that bad things won't happen. It does not mean that God does not love us or has abandoned us. I don't believe that bad things happen because God “willed” it. I do not believe in a punishing God but it is challenging to love when we are hurting. God understands that, which is where the community of believers plays a role. That community of the faithful can help us when we falter.

What I have come to know is when I am disciplined in my faith life and walk regularly with God and take the time to listen for those quiet whispers, the spiritual switch is “turned on” and I am much calmer when bad things happen.

Love God with all my heart, mind and soul. Love God with a fierceness as though my life depends upon that love – which indeed it does. How much easier would my life be, if I consistently trusted that God will take care of the details and I concentrate on being the person God wants me to be?

Let us pray: *Almighty God, help me to walk in your way and trust your love for me. Help me to love in the way that you first loved me through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.*



Monday, November 2, 2015

Text: Mark 12:31-33 (NIV)

The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Years ago, I was a member of a well-established Lutheran church in a different state. There was a small group of people that perceived themselves as the “guardians” of “their” church and set themselves up as “gatekeepers”. No programming (either youth or adult), change in liturgical setting, or outreach could be done without this “group’s” approval. This group of four elderly adults did not serve on the council or on any subcommittees. They made the lives of the pastoral staff very difficult, even though it was the preceding pastoral staff that allowed this controlling behavior to develop.

I was young, idealistic and wanted to bring change to this church. I had a background in community development and this church was located in a “changing” neighborhood with a large percentage of residents being Asian or Hispanic descent.

I was met with roadblock after roadblock and I shared my frustration and dislike of this small group of “gatekeepers” with a friend. My wise friend counseled me by saying “God did not command us to like people. God commanded us to love. No Exceptions. Jesus demonstrated this through his ministry.” That took the wind out of my pity party sails! I began to look at the situation differently. How can I approach this problem out of love versus wanting these people to “like” me and “my well intentioned plans” in order to make change? I wish I could say there was a Disney tale ending to the story, but I changed and possibly the “gatekeeper’s” changed as well. I was not at that congregation long enough to observe any change.

What did happen is I began to ask myself what loving these people would look like? What does “God-Love” (agape) entail? For me it meant listening with no judgment and asking them questions to get to know them where they were at. It meant demonstrating the change I wanted to see by being that person – i.e. inviting the neighborhood children to events and Sunday school and talking to the neighborhood families while I was out walking my dog. It meant not being afraid of accepting an invitation from someone different from me. Did great change happen? Probably not. I saw it more as a tiny pebble tossed in a pond that makes very small ripples – but there were ripples. I was no longer angry with the controlling gatekeepers. Maybe, just maybe, my demonstration of love had a ripple effect in their hearts as well.

Let us pray: *Dear God the Father of all. Help me to love as you have loved me. Help me to be an example of your love through my interactions with all of your children. In Jesus name, I pray. Amen.*



Tuesday, November 3, 2015

Text: Psalm 51 (NIV)

“...¹⁰Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. ...”

One of my life lessons has been – If I don’t learn the lesson, circumstances will keep recurring until I do. One of those lessons has been to learn to trust – specifically to trust God.

There are probably many reasons why trust has been a challenge for me, but the more important lesson has been the journey to trust. My life would have probably been “easier” if I had learned to trust God earlier; however, I have come to believe that God has worked within the confines of my mistrust or misplaced trust.

It seems to me that it has been at my lowest and darkest moments where there seemed to be absolutely no options left –nowhere else to turn when I finally let go and let God. I know that sounds trite and simplistic. Ultimately, letting go and developing trust has been a fair amount of hard work, but in the end of the analysis, I began to ask myself: Do I really believe that God can “Create in me a pure heart? Renew a steadfast spirit within me? Do I really believe that there can be joy in my soul and that God can grant me a willing spirit to sustain me?”

This is when I began to fully comprehend Jesus the Christ as the redeemer. This was when I realized my faith life hit the proverbial rubber road. How much easier would my life be, if I consistently trusted that God will take care of the details? What if I simply concentrated on being the person God wants me to be?

I still vacillate between wanting to control and take over versus trusting that God will guide me. It is a daily affair, sometimes several times a day! This does not mean that bad things do not ever happen in my life. They do – sometimes my life plate over flows and I respectfully ask God to “bless” someone else for a while – Thank You Very Much!! What has changed for me is that I have let go of all expectations. I have accepted that I do not see the “big picture”. I say Thank You even for the “bad things” – sometimes with gritted teeth.

What has changed is God has renewed my spirit within me. My heart and soul are more loving and gracious than in my youth. I am more humane. I trust that I am one of God’s tools and that when I least expect it God will use me when the world needs me most. There will be no accolades or awards, but God will be pleased and in the end that is what matters most.

Let us pray: *Gracious and loving God, guide my heart, thoughts and actions today. Help me to be a blessing to others. Create in me a clean heart and restore my soul. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.*



Wednesday, November 4, 2015

Text: Micah 6:1-8 (NIV)

Listen to what the Lord says: “.... My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me. I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam.” ... ⁶ With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? ⁸He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

I encourage you the reader to take the time to read the book of Micah in its entirety or at the very least the entire referenced passage as the above is an excerpt.

I was struck by the Hebrew response to the prophet. Even taking into account the historical context, the response seems very disrespectful – almost dripping with sarcasm “*What shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?*” It reminded me of snippets of conversation heard from congregants over the years during stewardship drives and in the general community during other fund raisers. Sometimes people become bitter when the perception is “They have way more than I have – why do I have to give anymore?” or “I have suffered enough – I cannot and will not give more!” What does the God of all Creation demand of us? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God! What does that look like? It looks a lot like loving – the kind of love that is fierce. A love that works, plays and engages the community in an endeavor to keep embracing, forgiving, returning and offering of one self.

In order to do that, a person must first fiercely love oneself before offering that same fierce love to others; however, having stated that there is an “energy” exchange that can take place. Even when it is difficult to love yourself, demonstrating that love for another person can ricochet back and help fill your soul. Loving yourself fiercely looks a lot like someone who truly understands that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit - for yourself and for your neighbor.

Let us pray: *Dear God the Father of all. Help me to love fiercely today. Help me to act justly, to love mercy and walk humbly with you. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.*



Thursday, November 5, 2015

Text: Romans 5:9-11

⁹Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! ¹¹Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Years ago, I had a discussion with my pastor about world religions, the common denominators and what makes Christianity unique and specifically why subscribe to Lutheran branch of Christianity?

It was a great conversation, and put me on a journey that continues to this day. Lutheran is how I was raised and I find comfort in the Lutheran liturgy. I also feel proud of the fact that the ELCA has grappled with larger social issues. I was raised in the former ALC (American Lutheran Church) with a strong three year academic catechism curriculum.

The above passage is what frequently brings me back in both awe, wonder, and a profound sense of gratitude. Jesus the Christ is the redeemer and reconciler of all of God's Children. When I do not feel this redemption or unworthy of this gift, it is not because God has left my side, it is because I have turned away. It is usually the result of not being grateful for my daily blessings that are offered each day. Even tough, gritty events can offer the chance of gratitude, if for no other reason, than to be thankful that the day has come to an end. When I have done things that I am embarrassed by or ashamed of and would rather "not" confess them to anyone – this brings me to laughter. Seriously? Do I think God does not already KNOW what I have done? Is God displeased? Yeah, probably, but then I remember, Jesus the Christ, has already paid the price for my stupidity, stubbornness and pride.

I simply need to remember and turn back.

Let us pray: *Dear God the Maker of all of humanity, help me to remember the gift of reconciliation that Jesus paid through his death. Help me to turn back to you steadfast love and gift of Grace. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.*



Friday, November 6, 2015

Text: Psalm 146 (NIV)

Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul, I will praise the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing. Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, the Maker of Heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them – the Lord, who remains faithful forever. He upholds, the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the

widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. The Lord reigns forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord.

I love the Psalms. They capture every human condition and emotion in poetry. This Psalm reminds me that God's time is not my time. God's time is forever, my time is finite.

Sometimes when I see wicked things done – sometimes in Jesus name - I wonder, does God truly hear the lament of the oppressed? When people are judged and abused because of their gender, color of their skin, age or anything else that some person wants to denigrate – or worse when it becomes part of the popular culture and it is deemed “OK” – I wondered does God truly hear? Now that I have several decades around the sun, I have come to realize that God not only works through mysterious ways, but also through seemingly the most unlikely of avenues. I have witnessed the interesting juxtaposition of a person's comeuppance appear in the least unexpected manner. In this way, even when I was the wronged person, the justice came from “elsewhere”. In another interesting turn of events, when I was in a position to rage against a person who inflicted great harm upon both myself and close family members, it was as if “a great scale” was lifted from my eye and I saw the person in a new light. I saw the person as one who was deeply wounded and in need of compassion. Did this excuse their actions and behavior? No, but in forgiving him, I came to understand that he was in fact a deeply tormented person and I would not want to be him.

Let us keep our trust in God and allow whatever needs to happen to the “ways of the wicked” stay in God's hands.

Let us pray: *God the Maker of all that is, help me to be your agent of love and respond compassionately to those in need and trust that you will indeed frustrate the ways of the wicked. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.*



Saturday, November 7, 2015

Text: Mark 11:12-14, 20-25

¹²The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. ¹³Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” ...²⁰In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. ²¹Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” ²²“Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. ²³“I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. ²⁴Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

I confess that I have never liked this scripture passage as it seemed to me a petty thing for Jesus to do – curse a fig tree for having no fruit when it isn't even the season. What good could possibly come from that?

Then I came across an enlightening little tome titled Resurrecting Jesus: Embodying the Spirit of a Revolutionary Mystic written by Adyashanti. Re-reading this passage through Adyashanti's eyes I see the passage quite differently. I do believe that Jesus was always teaching – educating his followers in lessons that would have meaning for them long after he was gone.

My new interpretation of this scripture is that simply being the fig tree is God's gift. The fruit of the fig tree is its gift to the world. Who we are is God's gift to us – what we do with that is our gift back to God and the world. Whether we “feel” like it or not (in season or not), it is our obligation to always offer ourselves to the world in whatever capacity that may entail. Jesus was not cursing the tree because it was out of season. Jesus cursed it because it was not offering its “God-given” talent to the world.

Who are you? You are a child of God. What does God ask of you? To love your God with all that you have and love your neighbor as yourself. That love can be demonstrated through many avenues. Pick one.

Let us pray: *Dear God the Maker of all things, help me to be your instrument of love today. Help me to offer what gifts I have to the world with love. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.*

