

I Believe in Love

December 6, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Romans 8:31-39

Last week we started our Advent series that this year is based on a poem by anonymous source. The poem is titled "I Believe," and as we learned last week the words that are powerful under any circumstances are particularly powerful given their history – the story goes that they were found scratched into the wall of a dark underground hideout where perhaps as many as hundreds of Jews hid during WWII to avoid getting rounded up by the Nazis and hauled off to their death.

"I believe in the sun," the poem goes,
"even when it's not shining.
I believe in love,
even when I don't feel it.
I believe in God,
even when God is silent."

So last week we talked about the first line of the poem – I believe in the sun, even when it's not shining, getting to that first great Advent theme of hope. The belief that even when life turns into one big, massive struggle; even when we are facing things like pain and suffering and grief and uncertainty and sickness and exhaustion and depression and fear and any other struggle that life throws our way; even when it feels like the darkness of life is descending upon us and there is no end in sight, we believe that the sun still rises. We believe that Jesus is still the light that shines into our darkest moments. And we believe that the story that we are living right now is not the end of the story, just like the story that the ancient Israelites lived during and following the exile was not the end of their story. God has always been in the business of changing the script just when all hope seems lost. That's what God did on that first Christmas night, and that's what God does even now, today.

So today, on the second Sunday of Advent, we are moving into the second line of our poem: I believe in love, even when I don't feel it.

Over the last year and a half, I've told you all a lot of stories about my childhood. Most of these stories are really fun and they have something to do with caving, or backpacking, or jumping off of tall cliffs, or launching model rockets in our front yard. I have beautiful childhood memories of gardening and baking with my mom; of summer road trips in my grandparents' RV. As a kid, my life was pretty exciting. It was mostly happy. But it wasn't without its hard moments.

I remember when I was about nine years old, I think there was a little part of me that was beginning to sense that my parents were having some problems. I couldn't really articulate that very well, but looking back...it was just a really hard year for me. My parents hired a nanny to come in before and after school to take care of my sister and me – and I was absolutely horrible to her. I was, up until that year, a straight-A student, but my grades started to fall that year when I decided that I wasn't going to do homework anymore. I was angry. All the time. And toward the end of that year, my parents announced that they were splitting up. It felt like my world was crashing down all around me. Nothing made sense anymore. Everything was changing. That relationship between my mom and dad, that relationship that should've been a model to me of love and commitment had disintegrated, and to my little 9-year-old brain, love itself seemed to be hanging in the balance. I didn't know how life was going to go on, because everything that I thought I knew about life and love and family and connection was changing.

Over time I grew even angrier. Because I was having a hard time knowing how to process love, I was also having a hard time *expressing* love, to those who were trying their hardest to love me and care for me. My parents, of course, and also my nanny who had stuck with us through the transition, and my new stepmom. I was so guarded, trying so hard to protect myself from being hurt again that I couldn't even let myself be loved.

But here's the thing, that I didn't know at the time. Love is not contingent upon our ability to feel it or recognize it or express it. The fact that my world had gone dark, and all that I could really feel or express were anger and fear – that did not make love go away. I didn't recognize it for what it was at the time, but the love of those around me, and more importantly the love of God that I could begin to start seeing creeping into my world around that time – that love was like an invisible blanket, protecting me, or like invisible hands holding me through the darkness and pain, until the time that I could finally open my eyes and once again see and recognize love for what it was.

As the writer of the Song of Songs writes, "Love is as strong as death." Or, in the words of Kristoff in *Frozen II* – because as you should know by now, I think in Disney – "Love is not fragile." In 1 Corinthians Paul writes "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." Or, in the words of the Psalmist: "God's steadfast love endures forever."

I believe in love, even when I don't feel it. I believe that when I am having a really, really hard time there is something stronger than me – something stronger even than death itself – sustaining me, even when I don't see it, don't feel it, don't notice it, don't recognize it. That doesn't mean it's not there. Sometimes I think that it is in these very seasons that love is working harder than it has ever worked before and it is only because of the love that we can't always see or name that we ever have the strength to continue on at all.

It's kind-of a cliché poem, but it's a favorite of many for a reason – the poem “Footprints in the sand” when a man is looking back over his life noticing that during the hardest times, there was only one set of footprints. And getting mad at God, he asks “why is it that you weren't walking with me when I needed you the most?” And God responds, “my child, those were the times that I carried you.”

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Today our scripture reading comes from the book of Romans, chapter 8 – a chapter that some people have dubbed “the 9-1-1 of every Christian believer” – our lifeline, a beautiful outline of what happens when we are desperate, when our world is crashing down around us, and our soul cries out to God.

Here's what happens, Paul says:

First, you need to know that no matter where you are, no matter where you come from no matter how broken or messy you may be, all of that pales in comparison to the love of God. Christ has already overcome sin and death and pain and suffering for our sake, and therefore, as hard as life may get sometimes, as much as we may mess things up at times, we are no longer bound by the weight of the whole world and the sin that once trapped us. Christ has overcome death; God has sent his Spirit into our lives to dwell within us; and therefore we are children of God. God's beloved sons and daughters, adopted; chosen; and sealed as his forever.

Second, we *know* that we are children of God and we have the spirit of God dwelling within us, and therefore we have hope. However, we also know that life can look pretty bad, pretty messy, sometimes. And we can still get lost and confused and we sometimes forget who we are. And in these times, the spirit of God has got us covered. “The spirit helps us in our weakness,” Paul writes. “That very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” And furthermore, Paul reminds us, that even when we get lost and confused, we have a God who “works all things together for good.” God takes the worst of right now and transforms that into something beautiful that has yet to be revealed.

“You are not living this life alone,” Paul is telling us. Even when we *feel* alone. Even when we've pulled a Jonah and tried to run away from God. Even when we are isolated, and lonely. Even when it seems like we are stuck here living life by ourselves and God is a long way away, we are not alone. The Spirit of God is here, within us. God's spirit has intertwined with our spirit so that every breath we take, the breath of God is breathing into us. Every thought we think, God's wisdom is inspiring us. Every word we speak, God's voice is calling out through us. Every prayer we pray, the Spirit of God is interceding for us.

The love of God, the presence of God, the comfort of God, the strength of God, the hands of God, the wisdom of God – are so closely-intertwined with us that nothing can separate us from the depth and the power of God's love. Nothing. Period. Not hardship.

Not distress. Not persecution. Not famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword. For my little 9-year-old self, not divorce, or broken promises. For us, living in 2020, Not masks. Not quarantine. Not cancelled plans. Not grief, not disappointment, not loneliness. For the Israelites, not exile. For the Jews hiding out in a dark cellar scratching words onto the walls, not even the Holocaust. “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

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Friends, this has been a year that has seriously tested the strength of love. How do we express love when our normal means of doing so are limited? When things like hugs and smiles and gatherings have been – and continue to be – tamped down? How do we live out our love for one another – especially for those who sit on the opposite side of an issue that is important to us? How do we love through disagreement – when love is the last thing that is being modeled within the world-at-large? How do we remain certain that we *are* loved, when we find ourselves more isolated, lonely, cut off from others? It is a very, *very* real issue right now. For people in nursing homes and hospital rooms, yes, but to some degree for all of us.

And the answer isn't an easy one, but it is a very simple one. It begins with a simple choice – the choice to believe that it is there. To trust that love is bigger than we can imagine, and stronger than we can comprehend. That love doesn't go away just because we are having a hard time seeing or feeling it – but that it is right here sustaining us all the more when we need it the most. We choose to believe that the God who created us; the God who came to earth as one of us; and the God who dwells within us and thus cannot be separated from us blankets us and holds us with a powerful love that is here with us now and will continue to be with us until we *are* able to feel it.