

“Love At the Center”

Psalm 22:25-31, 1 John 4: 7-21

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“Mommy, what is God like?” If there were a soundtrack to that moment, it might be from the movie “Jaws,” Perhaps you hear it... “dant dant, dant dant,” rising to a dramatic crescendo followed by blood curdling screams. That is how many parents feel when their children pose theological questions they feel unprepared to answer. We come to church to get answers to our deep theological questions. When parents feel more comfortable talking about God they can talk about God with their children. Never underestimate the power of wonderful Sunday school teachers that have the first opportunity to answer our children’s theological questions. Karen Ziel and I lead a session at Silver Lake for fifth and sixth grade students entitled “Does God have a Big Toe?” The title comes from a delightful book that explores what God is like. The writer of the theological essay we know as 1 John gives us a simple answer to that age old questions, “What is God like?” We hear first and foremost this morning that God is.... love.

We need not fear the dreaded theological questions that our children or grandchildren inevitably ask. What is God like? “God is love.” Talking about love should be easy. The writer of today’s lesson from 1 John paints a cautionary tale. He does not talk about a syrupy, sentimental kind of love. He describes a risk taking, putting oneself on the line for the sake of one’s brother or sister, kind of love. We are invited to experience a deeper love, a love that pays no attention to fear, a love that is bold and brave.

In 1 John the writer names two criteria for membership in the “beloved community:” believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and loving one another. We hear the word *love* twenty five times in the fifteen verses we read this morning. That leads me to believe that the early church was struggling to love. The lack of love among those who follow Jesus is not only something we experience, it has been a struggle for the Church from its earliest days. The command to love one another is a powerful theme throughout the theological essay we know as 1 John.

In the early church the two criteria for membership were equally important. Believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of God was equally important to loving one another. When the writer implores us to love one another, he is talking about the people who are already part of the community. We are not talking about some person far away whom we do not know or the visitor who might eventually join the church. We are talking about people whom we already know. If I can not love the person I know, the one who sits next to me in the pew, there is little hope that I can truly love people whom I do not know. Like charity, love begins at home.

I began this morning with a question, one presumably attributed to a child, but one we all contemplate. “What is God like?” If I ask you to close your eyes and picture God, what do you see? How would you describe God? What is your image of God? Our image of God shapes our theology and informs the way we live out that faith in the world. The

writer of 1 John, declares that God is love, and those who abide in love, who live in love, abide in God and God abides or lives in them.

In the Christian texts, the word abide is *meneo*. It means to sojourn, to continue or to be held. As we hear this text we may hear two things: when we live in love, we are held in God; and when we love God, God is held in us. The thought of God being held within us may fill you with great delight or great apprehension. If you imagine a very distant God with whom you have little personal contact, the thought of God dwelling within you may be terrifying. If God dwells within each one of us, when I greet you, I greet God. When I say something hurtful or disrespectful I not only wound you but God as well. When I hold you in the highest regard, I honor not only you, but God that dwells within you. How can I love God whom I can not see, when I can not love the God in you, whom I can see perfectly well?

God chooses to abide in us. We are the holding place for God. We are God's abode, God's dorm room, God's dwelling place. God abides in everyone. God does not pay rent. We can not do anything to coax God to abide in us or evict God when we no longer want God around. God does not choose some of us and overlook others because we are beautiful or smart or rich or poor or perfect or imperfect or we pray harder or work harder than others. God chose to take on flesh to dwell among us and within us. God became the "enfleshment" of love.

The preacher Jacqui Lewis, writes "This scripture from the Judeo-Christian tradition is not the only theology that indicates that God is inside of us. The Yogi's chant an ancient Sanskrit Blessing: Om Namah Shivaya. Why? It means, 'I bow to Shiva,' the Supreme Reality, the Inner Self. It is the name given to consciousness that dwells in all of us. This mantra is free of all restrictions. It can be repeated by anyone, young or old, rich or poor and no matter what state a person is in, they will be purified. The belief is that bowing to Shiva is bowing to God—the Great Almighty. The repetition of the name of God is equivalent to being merged in God's very being. Many Buddhists, Taoists and Hindus greet each other with 'Namaste,' which literally means 'I bow to you.' So the concept is that the divine spark in me recognizes the divine spark in you."<sup>1</sup>

If we really believe, that God resides in each person, that the divine spark in me recognizes the divine spark in you, we naturally behave differently. How would your life look if you truly believed that God lives in you? How could we be cruel to anybody, blow up anybody, fight with anybody, destroy the soul of anybody if we believe they house God? How could we mistreat our bodies, put poison in it, starve it, hate parts or all of it, if it is the very vessel in which the Holy One has chosen to dwell? We hear that "perfect love casts out fear," and then realize how few times in our lives we have actually experienced this kind of perfect love.

It is sad how frequently we allow that negative voice in our head to shape our behavior. Some times we find ourselves wandering without direction in our life, lost and lonely, frightened, angry, agitated, listless or lifeless. Some of us fill our lives with so many

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqui Lewis, "Love Shack," 30 Good Minutes, October 25, 2009.

responsibilities, so many things to do and places to be to avoid the reality that we are broken or empty or afraid.

“We live life without balance.” Jacqui Lewis goes on to say, “Most of our world religions understand this concept. The Taoists call it ‘imbalance,’ Buddhism calls it ‘ignorance,’ Islam blames our misery on rebellion against God, and the Judeo-Christian tradition calls our lack of understanding of our oneness with God ‘original sin.’” She wonders, “What would it mean for us to live as though God lives in us? As though the Divine resides in us?”

How can I not love my Hindu or Buddhist or Jewish brother or sister, if God is love and God dwells in all things? If God resides in all beings, in all parts of creation, in all things, how can I not love myself? These are the theological questions that shape our faith and with which all of us wrestle. There are no easy answers. I am grateful that despite our children’s proclivity to pose challenging questions, they also model the answers to those questions in ways we adults often do not. Until they are taught to think otherwise, our children see the good in everyone. They naturally recognize the Divine Spark in all people. They can not fathom why someone could be so cruel to another person because they live in another country or worship God in a different way or have a different color skin. They just want to get to know other people because they are people. They want to believe that God loves everyone else because they know God loves them. They want to believe that we are all brothers and sisters waiting to develop bonds of trust and love. It is that openness to love that we celebrate this morning. It is the desire to be part a beloved community where everyone does not look the same or prays the same or thinks the same, but rather loves the same. It is love that binds us together. Namaste!  
Amen

Source Cited:

Jacqui Lewis, “Love Shack,” 30 Good Minutes, October 25, 2009