

What I love about children's sermons is they often make complex theology understandable. How do we measure God's love? We can't! No matter how long a tape measure is, it will be inadequate. No matter how many cups of love we pour there isn't a container big enough to hold God's love. No matter how many seconds, minutes or hours we tick off, God's love will last longer. How silly it is to try and measure God's love.

Yet, isn't that what we try to do? We codify or qualify God's love by expecting a particular behavior or response from ourselves or from others. I'm sure we have all entertained thoughts that sound something like this, "God couldn't possibly love me, because I am not good enough," or "God couldn't possibly love me, because I have done such terrible things," or God loves me more than the other, because I am not so bad." We come to believe that human behavior – physically or mentally or even spiritually – will stop or prevent God from loving us.

Listen again to the opening words from the psalmist as translated by Eugene Peterson, "Oh, thank God – God's so good. God's love never runs out!" How does the psalmist know this? Because the people of God were miserable. They ignored God and even rebelled against God, such that their rebellion took a toll on their physical bodies. The people of God found themselves wrought with problems and near death. Only when their desperation was unbearable did they remember God and cry out to God.

Notice that God didn't say to the people, "Too bad, so sad, you don't deserve my love." God didn't say, "If you stop doing what you are doing, then maybe I will extend my love." God didn't make stipulations. God didn't ridicule or condemn their actions. God didn't reject or abandon his rebellious children. God simply did what God does. God loved. God's love healed God's children, rescuing them from the brink of death. God's marvelous and extravagant love was generously available in the depths of their self-made despair. As Anne Lamott and Timothy Keller remind us, "God meets us where we are." God sees us as we are. God accepts us as we are. God loves us where we are. God's love is unconditional. It is not dependent on our behavior. Yet, God's love made visible through grace, does not leave us where it found us. God's love will transform us into new creations as we receive the love freely offered.

This past Thursday I opened our time at Sunrise Lectio Divina with some moments of silence and in the silence, I asked the participants to rest in God's love, reminding them that there is nothing we have to do to earn God's love. We just have to receive it. As I imagined resting in God's love, what I pictured was myself crawling into the lap of God and being wrapped in God's warm and loving arms.

This image of God's love first came to me years ago, as I was in a rocking chair of my own holding one of my newborn twin sons. I remember love just pouring out of me, as I held my newborn resting in my arms. My son didn't have to do anything to earn my love, it was just present and overflowing. I had an aha moment that day, as I realized that this was how much God loves me and even more so, given that my love has limits and God's love does not. So, when I imagine resting in God's love, I am in a rocking chair in the lap of God. And in this place, in this space, in this sacred embrace, I am the recipient of God's extravagant love and it has nothing to do with me and everything to do with God. Being loved for just being, infuses me with love, for I realize that I don't have to do anything to earn God's love. Resting in God's love also helps me become more loving towards others, for I realize yet again that they don't have to do anything to be loved by God either.

Yet, do we believe that we are unconditionally loved by God? Can you rest in God's love, without worrying about your performance, your behavior, your thoughts, as one of God's precious children? Can we let go and let God simply love us? Can we?

The Gospel of John leads us to believe that maybe we all struggle to receive God's love, for the God-light, God's love, was streamed into the world through Jesus Christ, but women and men everywhere ran for the darkness. Somehow, we men and women fear the light, the love which God freely offers. We fear being exposed for what or who we really are. We fear that we are not good enough and so we hide in the shadows.

I think this is exactly where Nicodemus found himself. Although, by religious standards he was a successful leader. He feared that he was not enough. He was a Pharisee and also a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the temple in Jerusalem. Yet, there was something more that Nicodemus desired. His rule-based religious life wasn't enough. He saw something in Jesus – maybe his passion as he cleansed the temple - which drew his attention. But, Nicodemus didn't approach Jesus in the light of day. No, Nicodemus came under the cover of darkness. He wanted a conversation with Jesus, but he feared its consequences.

Listen to how Nicodemus started the conversation with Jesus, "Rabbi, we all know you're a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God's weren't in on it." Nicodemus complimented Jesus. He experienced something different in Jesus. He acknowledged Jesus' authority calling him a Rabbi, a teacher of the Law. He acknowledged that there was a distinct relationship between Jesus and God, God had to be in on the things he was doing, otherwise Jesus couldn't do what he was doing.

Jesus responds affirmatively, but continues the conversation saying, "Unless a person is born from above, it's not possible to see what I'm pointing to-to God's kingdom." Jesus isn't seduced by Nicodemus' flattery. Jesus' mission is clear – I'm pointing to God's kingdom. Jesus is pointing to a kingdom that requires a new way of being and a new order of being together. God's kingdom is Spirit infused rather than law defined. It is a new way of life made possible by God's unconditional love - love made visible through God's only son.

"For God so loved the world..." that the heavens were torn open and love came down. As John's Gospel begins, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God... What has come into being in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Yet, Nicodemus doesn't understand. A man schooled in religion, a man versed in temple protocol, a man respected as a leader of his faith just doesn't understand the Spirit infused life.

What about us? Do we understand what Jesus was trying to teach Nicodemus? Or are we still trying to earn our way into God's good graces? Oh, I go to church every Sunday, God must really love me. Oh, I tithe my income, God must think highly of me. Are we still pointing out how we follow the laws of faith better than others in our community? Did you see those people and how they sinned? Oh, our faith is so much stronger than theirs. It's as if we take out the measuring tape and determine whose faith is longer and stronger. It's as if we take a measuring cup and set limits saying God's love has run out for them. It's as if we call time out in order to notice who hasn't measured up to God's kingdom at any given moment.

Like Nicodemus we come up with ridiculous excuses in the form of questions, as we try to circumvent the transformation that is necessary in our own lives. Instead, of the

transformation we need, we point to everyone else as the problem. We like to believe that others are streaming towards the darkness, but not us. Yet, Peterson writes, “Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil – of running for darkness, addicted to denial and illusion – won’t come near the light, fearing a painful exposure.” The last word we hear from Nicodemus in this passage is a question, as he is still trying to understand what Jesus is teaching.

So, let me pose a question for us: If God so loved the world; if God came not to condemn or destroy the world and all that is in it, including us; if God came so that anyone and everyone can have a whole and lasting life, then why do we find it so hard to welcome the God-light, Jesus the Christ? Or more simply said, “Are we afraid of the light, too?”

I think we are, because nobody likes change. Nobody likes to admit that change that needs to happen in this world begins with me. We all instinctively point to someone else as the problem. It happens in friendships. It happens in marriages. It happens at work. It happens in our cities, states and nations. It happens in the church. Darkness is often our friend, whether we realize it or not, because being born from above – being Spirit infused – will expose what needs to be transformed in us, not them.

I am currently taking an online course through the Center for Action and Contemplation, an organization founded by Richard Rohr, a Franciscan monk. This course and our passages for this morning are intertwined, for the premise of the course is that each one of us is deeply loved by this mystery we call God. Yet, like John suggests, we stream towards the darkness rather than the light, because we fear transformation. We fear that what we think about ourselves, about others and even our world will be challenged. Our normal will be shattered and a new normal will have to be navigated.

The purpose of the Center for Action and Contemplation’s is to awaken a more loving world. Isn’t that what God’s kingdom is all about? As Peterson translated, “God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. God came to help, to put the world right again – to awaken the love that has already been poured into each one of us.

For God so loved the world... Do we really believe this? I think we might believe that God loves us, for in America we have individualized the Christian faith, focusing on personal salvation as the be all and end all of faith. Yet, does John say that God came for a narrow swath of people like you and me? No, it says that God so loved the world. The world and all its brokenness.

In the light of God’s love for the world we stand exposed, for we do not love as God loves. Now I am not saying this so that we can beat ourselves up and wallow in our shortcomings. I am saying this so that we realize that we are works in progress.

To live in the light, means we are willing to be transformed again and again and again. We are willing to experience new beginnings that will invariably come from old false things, beliefs and patterns of behavior that have to die.

Let me tell of my own transformation. I can clearly remember my judgmental thoughts, as I saw individuals struggling with homelessness walking up and down Euclid Blvd, as I made my nearly 3-mile drive from the freeway to the church. My thoughts and my behaviors in dealing with those without homes had been formed by years of conditioning. Don’t look at them and then they won’t ask for anything. Just walk by them or avoid them all together. They were to be feared, because you didn’t know what they might do. And then the shower ministry

began and God began the Spirit's work of transformation within me. The church had a video made for a mission conference and in that video I said, "This ministry reminds me of how important it is to see the image of Christ in everyone... It is not our station in life that makes us beloved, but it is that we are all God's children. This ministry is a constant reminder of the humility needed to remember that God loves everyone - without exception." The shower ministry was a crucible of faith where the refining fires of the Spirit transformed me. My heart was enlarged in ways that would have never happened unless I participated in that messy and chaotic ministry.

I don't know how God is going to transform you or me or us as a church, but I do know that living in light means that we are committed to being transformed again and again and again. And this transformation is never easy, because false things we believe to true – like my beliefs about those without homes - will need to be allowed to die.

I wonder... what needs to be allowed to die within you or me at this point in our lives or what needs to be allowed to die within us as a church, so that the Spirit infused work in us can be seen for the God-work it is?

Will we love the world around us, as God loves the world? That is, are we willing to live in the light, even though we know it will cost us? I pray so. Amen.