



SUNDAY SERMON

Learning to Love

The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 11, verses 16 to 19, and 25 to 30.

Jesus said, "To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

When I was a growing up, my grandmother took me to church every Sunday. She would come by our house in her big, maroon Buick to pick me up—think cushy leather seats, opera lights, the height of luxury circa 1980. My mom would get me ready to go—I was always dressed pretty smart, in a blue blazer and a clip-on tie. I would climb up into Mimi's car—that's what I called my grandmother, Mimi—and we'd be on our way.

Now, I liked going to church with my grandmother, but the Pentecostal church that Mimi took me to also scared me a little. I wanted to be good, but like Paul in the reading from Romans this morning, I always found out at church that I was never quite good enough. Now it might seem unusual that a five-year old boy should carry around a guilty conscience, but the rules at the Pentecostal church we went to were pretty clear. There were a lot of rules, and I was always finding out about more rules, and realizing in hindsight that I was breaking them.

And the thing about "the rules" at this church was—they weren't suggestions. If you broke the rules, you were "going to hell." They used that phrase, "going to hell," a lot; and it applied to pretty much everybody except the people who went to this particular church and followed all of their rules to the letter.

I remember one Sunday, in Sunday School, we were talking about the three wise men and how they found Jesus by following a star. It was close to Christmas, and just that week I had watched a movie on TV about just this story, and I was so excited because I knew something about it already. Towards the end of the class, the teacher asked us what we thought about the story, and when it was my turn to speak, I said, "Well, I watched this movie about it on TV this week, and in the movie, there were the three wise men, but there was this other guy too, and ...".

By this point, I knew that I had said something wrong because of the look of horror on the teacher's face. He cut me off: "We don't watch TV," he said, "It's a sin." And he moved on to the next student.

Continued

DATE

The Fifth Sunday
after Pentecost
Sun., July 9, 2017

PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

READINGS

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49,
58-67
Psalm 45: 11-18
Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

The other kids in the class obviously knew that watching TV was a sin. After the class was over, no one would even talk to me, and I'm sure they went home and caused all sorts of trouble for my grandmother by telling their parents that Jason Cox had a TV at home, and not only that, but I was foolish enough to talk about it in Sunday school.

The point is — I had no idea that watching TV was a sin! So not only was I ashamed and embarrassed by being so stupid in front my teacher and the Sunday School class, I also had to deal with the fact that, no matter how good I was otherwise, now I was going to hell because I watched TV! Never good enough, you see.

But no matter how negative this church experience at church was, things were still okay, because when it was over I'd climb back into Mimi's Buick, and we'd go back to her house where she would fix my lunch, and afterwards I'd get to take a nap. Now Mimi always talked to me like I was a grown-up, and she loved to tell stories. She'd tell me stories about what it was like to grow up, "poor as dirt" as she said, in rural Arkansas during the depression. And she would tell me about my dad when he was a little boy.

But a lot of the time, she told me stories from the Bible. And I have to say, I learned a lot more about God from listening to her bible stories than I ever did in church.

There are probably a lot of reasons why that was the case, but I think a big part of it was because of who was telling the stories to me. Because although Mimi took me to this strict church with a narrow view of God and filled with a lot of mean-spirited people — she was just the opposite. She laughed a lot, and she was kind and easygoing and generous, and I never doubted for a second that she loved me, even when I did something that I knew was bad. Her love was like a light that surrounded all those bible stories, and reflected on them. Or maybe it was God's love shining through her. But in any case, when she talked to me about Jesus, I felt a lot differently about him than when my Sunday School teacher at church did.

I think most of the people who went to my grandmother's church were like the "children of this generation" who Jesus complains about in today's Gospel. No matter what you did, you could never make them happy, you could never be good enough. Feasting was wrong and fasting was wrong; TV was wrong and having too much fun was wrong and— pretty much everything was wrong. This was a demanding group of Christians, with high standards and very little forgiveness in their hearts, and they believed in a God who was just like them.

Now I think if they read Paul a little more closely in his letter to the Romans, they would have realized that, at the end of all his guilty agonizing about not being good enough, he comes to the realization that it doesn't matter—he simply can't be good enough. He isn't capable of getting rid of all the unkind, uncharitable thoughts in his heart. The only thing he can do is let go of trying to be good, let go of thinking that he can do it on his own, and allow God to work through him instead.

My favorite line from the Gospel this morning is when Jesus points out that the truth is hidden from the wise and the intelligent, and only infants can know it. And this is the truth I think he means: the truth that we can't do this on our own. We can't get through life, we can't be kind or generous or good, we can't help others and save the world— on our own. The truth is that we need to stop trying to be good, and start trying to . . . open our hearts up, so there's a place in there for God to live.

Children understand this better because children know that they have to depend on others for everything they have. But we—wise, intelligent, responsible, accomplished— we make it all happen, out there in the world. We make the policies and set the agenda and provide for our families and buy things and organize things and run things! We're important!

And we forget that, in matters of faith, in the things of God—things like loving our enemies and giving to the needy and protecting God's creation—in these things, we're helpless infants who depend on God's help in just the same way our children depend on us.

The only real way to love others is to start believing, deep in your heart, that God loves you, no matter what. No matter how good or bad you are. And God does love you, either way: whether you are good or not, and whether you believe it or not. Whether you work hard all your life trying to earn God's favor, or just accept, right now, that God loves you ahead— God's love is there. But, trust me, accepting that God loves you, and believing it, makes you a lot happier and easier to get along with: more like my grandmother than my Sunday School teacher.

And once you really believe it's true, once you really trust in God's love, you've got a lot more energy to spend loving others out in the world, rather than working so hard to prove to yourself that you're good enough. You are good enough, and God does love you. So now the question is— how do you live with that knowledge? What do you do with it? It's more love than you'll ever need just for yourself— so do you hoard it? Or give it away?

Amen.