

Sermon Title: The Love of God- From Head to Heart

Scripture Reading: 1 John 4: 7-21

Part 4

August 9th, 2015

Today brings us to the final sermon entitled **The Love of God- from Head to Heart**. Over the past three weeks we have focused on Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees in his teaching about the lost Ones. The Pharisees were so concerned about knowing and obeying all of the Law of Moses, that they were blinded to the fact that Jesus himself was the fulfillment of the law that they were trying to keep. Over three hundred Old Testament prophecies pointed to Jesus as the Messiah that they were watching for!

We learned that while making his final journey to Jerusalem, Jesus taught the crowd using many different parables. These parables are recounted in slightly different ways and in slightly different orders in the first three gospels. In Matthew's gospel a Pharisee, a teacher of the law, asked Jesus to summarize his teaching. The Pharisee asked Jesus " what is the greatest commandment?" What was behind the Pharisee's question? The Jews believed that each commandment was equally important. In Matthew's account, the Pharisee was again trying to trap Jesus into saying something blasphemous, by forcing Jesus to highlight one of the 613 commandments as the greatest!

Jesus responded to the question by reciting a familiar section of the Jewish Shema from Deuteronomy...you may remember it begins with "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord

is One" ... this is the primary confession of the Israelites. This prayer is said twice daily by all observant Jews. Jesus begins his answer by continuing with the next part of the Shema "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He goes on to say that everything that it is in the law and the prophets- the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures is summed up in these two commandments. In other words, we can try to follow all 613 commandments, or we can stick to the basics, the law of love, which embraces all of the commandments. In a similar way, in John's gospel, Chapter 13, Jesus puts this Old Testament commandment in a new context for his disciples by saying "A new commandment I give to you that you that you love one another as I have loved you. By this shall everyone know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another."

The centre of God's law is the law of love...the evidence that we embrace that love and have taken it to heart is that we love ourselves and one another. By removing slavish obedience to a long list of do's and don'ts and turning to the law of love, we can move from understanding **about** the love of God, to actually experiencing and sharing the love of God in a tangible way.

Jesus knew that God's law of love was radical. It was so radical that he not only taught and preached it but he also embodied and modeled it. Looking through our modern cultural lens, it is not always easy to see how radical Jesus was. When Jesus says that you should love your neighbours, we would all likely nod in agreement. But for the Jews, loving one's

neighbor meant loving one's fellow Jews. Full stop. For the Jews, this love was exclusive...exclusive for the Chosen People of God...loving their neighbour did not mean that they had to love the "outsider", or the "foreigner" in their midst. They put big hedges or fences around their love. "Love the Samaritans? Absolutely not! Love the prostitutes? Not required! Love the tax collectors? Not on your life!" So in response to the Pharisee's question in Luke's gospel "Who is my neighbour?" Jesus answers radically with the Parable of the Good Samaritan! Yes, God's love is radical. We know that is true because it is deliberately inclusive of the Samaritans, the Jew's sworn enemies.

When Jesus reached Jerusalem, on the night that Jesus was betrayed, he gathered his disciples together and shared his final meal with them, a commemorative meal of bread and wine...communion... symbolic of Jesus' gift of himself ...his body and his blood. At Golgotha, he hung on the cross and gave his life as the ultimate sign of sacrificial love...that a man should lay down his life for his friends. In this final act of love, Jesus gave up his life for us to pay the penalty for our sins.

When we studied about the two prodigal sons...the younger one and the older one...were you still left feeling that one son deserved more than the other? A sort of merit-based love? Think about this. If God's love for us **were** based upon merit, who among us could stand? If God's love for us **were** based upon merit, who among us could stand? Do you still find it really hard to accept the fact that God loves you **unconditionally**, freely, and despite everything you may have done or not done? If so, you are not alone. I invite you to watch

this short video that vividly describes a young man's struggle with taking his knowledge of God's love from his head to his heart!

PLAY VIDEO CLIP- FROM HEAD TO HEART

The young man in the video is expressing his difficulty with taking the knowledge that he has that God loves him, and making that knowledge real in his heart. How can we make this transition from head to heart? Perhaps the following analogy about children will shed some light.

We have all seen and interacted with many children in our lives... Most of us would agree that most of the time, children are lovely! For those of you who have had children of your own, I am sure that you have many happy memories of their childhood.

But in our experience, everything changes when your first child, grandchild, niece or nephew arrives! When Brian and I became first-time grandparents, casual observers might have thought that there could be only one baby in the universe, such was our excitement! As new grandparents, Brian and I have since joined that exclusive club of obsessed people who think nothing of spending a morning browsing at Babies R Us, or taking a 4 hour road trip...to Ottawa...Brian calls it a drive by... because we long to be in the company of our baby! Our understanding of "child" has gone from faded memories of a time long ago represented in a photo album to a present, in-the-moment lived experience. Our present joy is the result of our relationship with a specific child, our precious granddaughter Elise.

What is it about a new baby's arrival into a loving family that changes everything? It's called unconditional love! Pure, unadulterated, unbounded love and joy! From conception to birth to infancy to toddlerhood and beyond, these precious little gifts from God capture our hearts. Loving parents and grandparents and family members only want the best for this little one...they want to meet the infant's every need ...answer every cry, and celebrate every small developmental step. "She's sitting up, she's creeping, she's crawling, she's walking, Look Mum, no hands!" FaceBook becomes the new grandparent's photo brag book! This little child brings such indescribable joy to our lives! We revel in the playful things that she does and her sense of fun. One of the funniest things that we have noticed is that our daughter Sarah has said "good girl" to our granddaughter Elise so often, that her first words were "good girl!" Elise walks around the house saying "good girl" to everyone else too! In fact, we wonder if she thinks her name is "good girl". There is something profoundly theological in this illustration, when we hear God whispering "good girl", "good boy".

If we picture God as a loving Father... we realize that God's love is all this and so much more.... Similar to but far greater than a parent's love, God's love for us knows no limits- it is protective, nurturing, boundless and free. God delights in being our parent, and delights in being involved in the small details of our lives. He too celebrates our successes. He longs for relationship with us. He is constantly whispering, "you are my beloved child!" I know your name...you are mine" ... "good girl... good boy!" When God notices that an intimate

connection with us is missing, God doesn't abandon us, but pursues us like the hound of heaven, or the waiting Father. We are never beyond the reach of God's love for us. Even when we have wandered away, God knows where we are and he has us in his care.

This relationship that God the Father wants to have with us is one that is "up close and personal". The relationship is not based on what we do for God to show him our love, but rather on what he has done for us to show us his love. Today's scripture reading sums it up by saying in verse 10- this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us! It is because of our experience of God's love for us that we are able to love others. This is the crux of this very simple message...The Love of God...from head to heart.

When I was at seminary, we had a series of interviews at Presbytery so that it could be determined if we would be suitable candidates for ordained ministry. In my very first interview, before I started any course work, I was asked to describe my faith...and I said..."I can summarize my faith very simply in the words of a children's hymn...Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so, little ones to him belong, they are weak but his is strong" ...In my final certification interview, I was asked the same question. My reply was like this...although I can talk about my faith in a more nuanced way after three years at seminary, I would still say that the words of "Jesus loves me this I know" still ring true for me. One of the committee members, a senior minister of the church, noticed that I was hedging my answer, and trying to make it sound like I had learned something at seminary! She gently encouraged me...do not be reluctant to make your answer very simple! It is

because of Jesus' love as described in scripture, that you can know and experience the love of God. And if you continually experience God's love, then you can share it with others.

Over 1,000 years ago, Rabbi Worms wrote a beautiful one -stanza poem about the love of God. This poem is still read every year at the Jewish festival, Shavuot, which corresponds with our celebration of Pentecost. This is what he wrote:

**Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made;
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.**

In 1917, a Christian composer, Frederick Lehman discovered this poem. Notably, a patient in an insane asylum had written this poem on the walls of his room! From its foundational stanza, Lehman composed two more stanzas and a chorus. The result is this well loved hymn entitled **the Love of God**. Listen to the words that he added.

The love of God is greater far

**Than tongue or pen can ever tell.
It goes beyond the highest star
And reaches to the lowest hell.
The guilty pair, bowed down with care,
God gave His Son to win;
His erring child He reconciled
And pardoned from his sin.**

**O love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure—
The saints' and angels' song.**

**2 When hoary time shall pass away,
And earthly thrones and kingdoms fall;
When men who here refuse to pray,
On rocks and hills and mountains call;
God's love, so sure, shall still endure,
All measureless and strong;
Redeeming grace to Adam's race—
The saints' and angels' song.**

If you are still struggling to know and feel the passionate love of God, to feel the warmth of his approval... do not despair...you are not alone! Simply come to God and ask him to

change your head knowledge about him into heart knowledge of him. Step out in faith and accept what Jesus has done for you on the cross, in paying the penalty for your sin and ask him to be the Lord of your life. Jesus says “Behold, I stand at the door of your heart and knock...if any person hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him” ...This is table fellowship... the most intimate relationship... that Jesus himself offers to each one of us.

We will finish this sermon and our time together by singing this hymn, The Love of God, ... a hymn of love, adoration and recommitment to the God whom we love. I invite you to meditate on the words of the hymn as we sing. Please remain seated.

(sermon written and preached by Monica McClure at St. Andrew's, Whitby on August 9th, 2015)