

## **God Loves**

God Can: Part 4 “God Loves”

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael – November 13, 2022

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

**Readings:** Zephaniah 3:14-20; Romans 5:1-11

**Reflection:** Psalm 103

**Greeting:** Let us love each other, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. God’s love is revealed to us through his only Son. Christ came to the world that we could live through him! (1 John 4)

**Prayer:** O God, our guide and our guardian, we humbly enter into your presence. May we be blessed by your grace and your love as we join together to worship you this day. May we grow in heart and mind with you, Lord. May you lift us up and strengthen us by your righteousness and your steadfast faithfulness. Help us to be bold in our faith so that we may do your will joyfully and eagerly. May we worship you in a spirit of truth, that we may follow you all the days of our lives, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

**Reflection:** Psalm 103

*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits— who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s. The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust. As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments. (Psalm 103:1-18 NRSV\*)*

We read the words of Psalm 103 and we hear of God's redeeming love. That God doesn't deal with us according to our sins or repay us for iniquity. That God's great compassion is for his children. How have you experienced that great and enduring love in your life? How have you shared that love with others? What does it mean to you that you are forgiven? What does it mean to share that forgiveness with others? How can we learn to love as Christ loves us?

**Prayer:** O God, your steadfast love and faithfulness have brought us together this day. Help us to live by your grace and mercy always. May we share in the hope you have inspired in us and may we share always in your blessing. We ask that as we come before you with our joys and our concerns that you will strengthen us by your spirit. As you are with us in our celebrations and sorrows, may you lift us up in both our laughter and tears. May your light guide us and lead us to life everlasting, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **Sermon:**

Our scripture readings for today come from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading for today comes from Zephaniah chapter 3 verses 14 through 20.

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival." I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord. (Zephaniah 3:14-20 NRSV\*)*

Our next reading for today comes from Romans chapter 5 verses 1 through 11.

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely, therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by*

*his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:1-11 NRSV\*)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This week we look at a familiar theme that I think we still need to hear. That theme is the idea that God loves. I bring it up because I think we can underestimate God's love. We either forget the depth of God's love or we shy away from it. And it can be hard to accept that love, because it means we accept that the love is both for us and for others. And it can be hard because we can be limited by our own ability to love. And it holds us back from understanding just how much God could love us. I say this because of the way that we talk about each other. Often when we talk about others, if we aren't saying something in love it is because we are holding something of ourselves back. Because if we loved the way that God loves us, we wouldn't hesitate to love the way that we do. We wouldn't hold back the way that we do if we could fully embrace the love God has for us. Because when God shows us how expansive his love for us is, we don't always know how to respond. And if we aren't sure how to respond, sometimes we just don't respond at all. And if we have trouble responding to God's love, it means we are struggling to reflect that love. And that starts when we have trouble accepting that love for ourselves.

I'll be straight with you here; I think we have so many issues with people being judgmental and hurtful is because of a failure to accept God's love. Too often people are ready to talk about love without being able to live it. All because they have trouble accepting that love. Bear with me here. We often try to think about if someone is worthy of God's love or not and we get hung up on the way God should be punishing us. We can get so focused on that that we frame love as the relief from deserved punishment. It isn't framed in a way that celebrates just how expansive God's love is, but in a way that looks at punishments we should have received. Instead of experiencing the exultation of having judgement taken away, we can only understand the love by judging. If I walked up to you and said that I know you loved me because you didn't punch me in the face today, you might wonder if I'm alright. But we do this all the time with God's love! We think that an escape from punishment is the extent of love instead of a sign we are loved. Too often the idea is that love is that we are forgiven when we should be celebrating that we are forgiven because we are loved. It isn't that we can be loved because we were forgiven, but that we are forgiven because we were already loved. But we can get so focused on the punishment side of things, and I think it's because we start thinking about how we want people to be punished. That we want God's love to be for us and not for the "wrong people." We think that God's love needs to be limited to those who are worthy. And that isn't the picture that Scripture paints for us.

We can see this in our reading from the end of Zephaniah. Because the idea of judgement comes with a promise of hope. That we are called to sing aloud and to rejoice because God has taken away judgement. Jerusalem is told that God "will renew you in his

love” and will “exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.” God will save the lame and gather the outcast, changing shame into praise. God, like a good shepherd, will gather his people to him. Zephaniah says that God will sing and rejoice over us. Not because we have made ourselves worthy, but because we have been renewed in God’s love and had judgement removed from us. That we will be shown God’s love and we will understand God’s care and concern for us. And we see this in Christ.

Because this is echoed in Paul’s letter to Rome. “Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” We don’t have shame, we have hope. We can hold our heads up in difficult times because God’s love is with us. It has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit so that we would know God’s love is with us. Paul then drives this home, and we can miss this one. What happened when we were still weak? Christ died for the ungodly. It’s rare enough that someone might dare to die for a righteous person, but Christ died while we were still sinners. Paul didn’t say that Christ died for everyone who already turned from sin. Paul is not saying Christ died for the righteous. Paul is saying that Christ died for the ungodly and the unrighteous. Christ died for the sinners.

Now, one of the things that can get lost here is that we start thinking about being saved by Christ’s life and we try to move too quickly from our being reconciled. But Paul drives this home, that if we could be reconciled to God through Christ when we are enemies of God, how much deeper is that love when we accept it. We can miss the point here by focusing on the “us versus them” mentality of those who are saved against those who are not. But that initial point should be guiding us. Christ died for sinners. Christ died for the unworthy. Christ died for the ungodly. Christ died for the unrighteous. Now, we might not take that fully in at first. But I want that idea to settle in. Because this question needs to be at the forefront of our minds. Who did Christ die for? Take a moment to reflect on this. Just to let it sink in. Christ died for sinners. Right? OK, so now I want you to name someone who is not a sinner. I would like you to pick out one person who is not a sinner. Silence. Why? As we remind ourselves so often, all have fallen short of the glory of God. But in God’s great love, God has seen fit to redeem us. God’s love is demonstrated by the fact that Christ died while we were yet sinners, even when we are counter to what God desires, God forgives us because he loves us. He didn’t demand that we make ourselves righteous first. No, God recognizes us as broken people and flawed individuals. Yet God still saw fit to redeem us in his love.

This is where things get tricky though. Who is it Christ loved so much that he would die so that they could truly experience love? Sinners. Who did God’s love overflow for to the point that he would reach out and love us before we even knew how to love? Sinners. So, answer me this: who is it that God does not love? Difficult question? Here’s another one. Who is it that you do not love? Don’t answer that out loud. But how does your answer to one question impact how you answer the other? We often try to justify our inability to love others through the judgements we pass on them. We judge others on if they are worthy of our love. But who did Christ judge as worthy of love? Sinners. God tells us he is removing judgement so we will

understand how deep his love is. Not so that we will pass judgement on everyone else on if they are worthy of that love. God didn't show us this great love so that we could decide who's in and who's out. God didn't show us this great love so that we could decide we don't need to love. But we can make the best excuses. We will figure out what it is others are doing that keeps them from God's love. We'll say it's because someone isn't living their life right. Have you been able to keep from sin by living your life right? Maybe we claim that we can't love because they live in sin. Here's a great question, have you sinned in the way you are living? Yet, God loves you. Here's the really hard one. Can you tell me every sin that you have committed? Even the wrongs you did without knowing it? Now, can you tell me which one made God stop loving you? None of them! If I accept that if I am redeemed in Christ because Christ first loved me, then that means that I should love others before I expect anything from them. If I can be forgiven because of love, then I can forgive because of love. We aren't called to decide who is worthy of love, but we are called to love so that we grow deeper in that love. Both in the love of God and in the love for one another. Because God's love has flowed into our hearts. And the best response we can have is to love because we are loved. But every time that we deny that love to someone else, it's because in our hearts we are saying we don't deserve God's love. Every time we turn someone away because we can't love them, it's because we can't accept that Christ loves us. Every time that we hold back our love, we hold back because we think God should hold back on us.

I was reminded of this again last week when we were celebrating Communion. There is a point in the liturgy that is a very powerful moment for me. And, I have to admit that I did not believe my friend and mentor Wally when he was preparing me for the first time I led that liturgy. He told me that it would change me. He was right. It was from the simplest of statements. "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven." That didn't change me. I said it and I believed it. But it was what happens next that got me. Because the response is "in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven." Sometimes I feel like I need to add a third time we say it. Where after I say it to you and you say it to me, that we all stop and turn to each other to say it again. "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven." Because I remember that first time and every time since then, it's that moment I really experience God's love best. Because I can see the way that God enables us to forgive each other. One of the most painful and difficult things we can do, but God makes it happen. Because God loves us so much that he wants us to be able to forgive and to be forgiven so that we can live. Not that we judge each other so we can hold each other back. Not that we withhold love so that we can teach a lesson. Not that we decide who is in and who is out. But we can forgive, and we can show others that kind of love to let them know they are forgiven. Not that they are judged, but that they are forgiven. Not that we wish they were punished, but that they know they are loved. Because when I hear you tell me that I am forgiven, I can hear Christ say it. When you tell me I'm forgiven, I can feel the Holy Spirit move and let that love pour into my heart. And it is overwhelming. But I've also discovered that the best response is to let the love overflow so that it flows from one heart to the next. We share God's love so that we all reside in the hope that is Jesus Christ. We share

that message of hope that through our Risen Savior we know that we are loved. So let that hope be in our hearts, and let love be in our lives. And let God's steadfast love and faithfulness be in all that we are and all that we do, and let it be done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Prayer of Confession and Pardon:** God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

**Offering:** If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Dismissal with Blessing:** May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## **Our Current Series – God Can**

Our current series is a look at the ways that God is a part of our lives, and all that God can do. We will spend five weeks exploring the ways that God acts. In them, we will see the ways God responds to us and how we can respond to God.

**October 23rd** – *God Adapts* – Exodus 3:7-12; 4:1-17

**October 30th** – *God Hears* – 2 Kings 20:1-7; Luke 11:5-13

**November 6th** – *God Unites* – Ephesians 1:11-23; John 17:11-24

**November 13th** – *God Loves* – Zephaniah 3:14-20; Romans 5:1-11

**November 20th** – *God Provides* – 1 Chronicles 29:9-18; Matthew 11:25-30

## **Prayer List**

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup Ambulance Crew		Eric Veach	Ed & Verna Titus
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Tricia Adkins
Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart	Phyllis Gabel
Ruth Ann Finley	Tom Finley	Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor
Kenny Holmes	Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert	Jeremy Klinger
Phil Hawickhorst	Ray Carr	Jane Williams	Alice Sherwood
Dean Carlen	Ross Matteson	Richard Durham	Carol Miller
Donna Carlen	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauzer	Steve Carlen
Connie Brown	Family of Leroy Kemper	Kyle Lehman	Kathy Hanks
Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser	Larry Thompson
Nick & Leana Ochoa	Evelyn Sue Icenogle	Kristen & Zach Morecraft	Greg Williams
Martha Roberts	Charlie & Charlotte Baxter	Paul Schulte	

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