

For the Sake of the Gospel

Depths of Love: Part 2 “For the Sake of the Gospel”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – February 25, 2024

2nd Sunday in Lent

Readings: Genesis 17:1-7,15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Reflection: Psalm 51

Greeting: All we like sheep have gone astray, we have all turned to our own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He bore our sins and made intercession for us all.

Prayer: O Heavenly Father, be with us in these forty days. Help us to remember how your blessed Son was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. May we recall how he was tempted to be an example as we face temptation ourselves. May we learn and grow as we follow Christ in this journey to the cross. Be gracious to all who have gone astray and bring them with penitent hearts and steadfast faith back into your fold. May we hold fast to your great love, as demonstrated through devotion and sacrifice by Jesus Christ your Son, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 51

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:1-17 NRSV)*

We read the words of Psalm 51, and we hear of how God offers us forgiveness. That we are called to praise God for his love. That God doesn't seek any sacrifice other than what we may offer of ourselves and our actions. Do you seek our God when you feel broken? Do you let the Holy Spirit guide you in becoming stronger because of that brokenness? Who do you know that could use your prayers this week? What are you learning as we journey with Christ to the cross? How can we explore the depths of love we find in Christ as part of Lent?

Prayer: Almighty God, you are with us in the deepest depths of our hearts and the smallest thoughts in our minds. Your steadfast love and faithfulness have been shown to us in the example set by Jesus Christ our Lord. We turn to you in this time of reflection with the celebrations that we have spoken aloud. We come before you with the worries we have voiced out loud. But we also come before you with the silent pleading from within. The joys and the worries we hold are all before you. Help us to know your mercy and grace so that we may know you are with us in our triumph and our defeat. May we always find our way back to you through our laughter and our tears. May our love for you grow day by day, and may we love each other as a sign of the love we find 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 is from Genesis chapter 17, verse 1 through 7 and 15 through 16.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her and also give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." (Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 NRSV)*

Our next reading is from Romans chapter 4, verses 13 through 25.

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there transgression. For this reason the promise depends on faith, in order that it may rest on grace, so that it may be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (who is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I

have made you the father of many nations”), in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So shall your descendants be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), and the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore “it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. (Romans 4:13-25 NRSV)*

Our final reading is from Mark chapter 8, verses 31 through 38.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (Mark 8:31-38 NRSV)*

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

We enter into the second week in Lent, and we get a bit of a daisy chain of thoughts in our readings. We begin with the promise to Abram, becoming Abraham, that he would be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. This promise is something that we see with physical and spiritual descendants because the multitude that comes from Abraham is not just those born to his line but all those that follow him spiritually. And we see this change when God makes this promise. That Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah and they will be blessed. That they will begin something wonderful. And we hear about this promise from Paul in his letter to the Romans. That it came to Abraham because of faith. That it wasn't exactly something that he had done. It was not because of adherence to the law. It was with faith. And we hear there that the descendants of Abraham include those who share in his faith. That we may share in that promise together as spiritual descendants of Abraham, who believed that anything was possible with God. That same faith “will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.” This sets up a central focus for Paul, and that was that faith was more important than the law and punishment. It also sets up a central idea of faith for our message today. Faith in what God proclaims. Faith that God can make things happen even when we aren't sure how

it could happen. Having faith that what God declares will transpire and that we don't need to try to control what God will do.

This brings us into our main reading today from the Gospel of Mark. We hear about what happens when we put ourselves before the gospel. We hear what happens when our faith is in ourselves and not truly in God. In Mark, we see Jesus teaching the disciples and they seem a little uncomfortable with what he's teaching them. This is because he is saying that the Son of Man will suffer and be rejected. Worse than that, he will be killed. I can feel for Peter in this scenario. I can understand how he must have been feeling, hearing Jesus proclaim these things. That he will be humiliated, that he will suffer, and that he will die. It isn't all bleak, because Jesus finishes with the statement that he will rise again. He says it all openly, and I think that is what was too much for Peter. The picture that we get from Mark's account is that Jesus is saying all of this openly to the people around them. Jesus is explaining what will happen so that people will understand God's love. He is explaining the path to salvation. As Paul puts it, he is handed over for our trespasses and that he will be raised then to justify us all. And he is asking them to accept this on faith. Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. He is chastising him for this teaching. I expect it was a mix of things. I can imagine Peter saying both that he shouldn't be teaching such inflammatory things openly, but also that he just shouldn't be teaching those things at all. That Peter refuses to accept the idea that Jesus will die. With that, we can see Peter trying to tell Jesus what he can and cannot do. Peter is telling Jesus what he can and cannot say. Peter is trying to dictate God's plans. The rebuke from Christ is swift and it is strong. If you ever had the idea that Jesus never said things that people would consider unkind, I would like to correct that notion now. Jesus uses strong words to snap Peter out of it. I think it is such a swift and decisive blow in order to make Peter know right away that not only was he wrong, but that he would lead others astray. Jesus tells Peter "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." This is harsh, but it is also true. The problem is that Peter is worried because he is obsessing about human things, falling in with his own desires. He's not listening to hear that all this must happen for the greater good. That all of this will happen so that we may understand and accept God's great love. He is hearing things he doesn't like, and Peter has decided that if he doesn't like it then they aren't going to happen. Because he's thinking about himself. His wants and desires, not what the world needs. Jesus is quick to point out the folly of this. I think that swift rebuke is because he knows Peter can be better. And the only way for him to be better is if he is corrected and set back on the right path.

Jesus calls everybody to him so that he can continue to teach. This is a section that was influential in my thinking on Lent. Because Jesus tells the people around him that if they wish to go after him, they should take up their cross and follow him. And I thought about that when thinking about taking something up for Lent. Because Jesus highlights that taking up that cross is an act of sacrifice. Part of our Lenten journey is to take up that cross and follow Christ to Golgotha. But what comes next really gets us back into that discussion of faith that began in

our other readings. We have a common teaching from Jesus here with a reversal of fortunes. This time, however, we see the peril of chasing after human things instead of God's things. The problem of chasing after human things is that you gain nothing. In the effort to save your life, you'll lose it. But if you give up your life for the sake of Christ and for the sake of the Gospel, you save your life. I think about this idea both in the idea of eternal life, but also in having purpose in this life. That we find new purpose and meaning when we live a life in Christ. Jesus is telling those around him that they end up gaining nothing if all they do is try to follow human desires. Because in the end, you will have nothing of value. You end up never being satisfied in this life, and you can't take any of it into the next. But if you give up on that selfish desire, you give up a life dedicated only to self and take up a life in Christ. Then you will find life and have it abundantly. You will gain love and friendship. You gain peace and happiness. You could follow human desires and keep gaining stuff, but never be able to save yourself. But in Christ we can find happiness in both this life and life eternal through him. He gives us life both here in this life and in the next, because of love.

But if we are to take up our cross and follow him, we can't do it for selfish reasons. We do it for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of that good news. The good news that God's kingdom has come near. The good news that God's love is for you. The good news that God's love is for everyone. The good news that God is with us. It is something that we accept by faith. We accept that not everything that happens will be to our liking. Not everything that happens will be easy. We may not like it at all. But sometimes things happen that we don't like. And I'm reminded of a quote from one of my favorite authors. "Things are strongest where they are broken." I thought of that because I think we can miss the way that brokenness allows us to heal. It allows us to understand the suffering of others. I think of the brokenness that is inflicted upon Christ, only for us to see the true miracle of healing that Christ offers us all. And it was in our reflection from Psalm 51 today. That an acceptable sacrifice to God is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart. Because we can have faith that God will heal us and make us whole again. And our faith is strengthened when we experience that healing. I think of that when I think about this journey to the cross, when we see what Christ was willing to endure for the sake of the gospel. To inspire us in a life of faith for what we are able to do for the sake of the gospel. That we can trust that God always has been and always will be with us. That God's love is ever before us, ready for us. That we may take the bad with the good, because in healing God makes us stronger. By faith, we are made stronger together. Together we make this journey to the cross. We strengthen each other in faith through the faith that Christ inspires in us all. That we move forward in Christ's great love. We invite others to share in this journey, and we watch over each other in love. So, today we think not of human desires, but we set our sights on God. By faith we take up our cross, and for the sake of the gospel, we take another step closer to the cross. Another step closer to understanding the depths of God's love for you, and for me. 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 – Depths of Love

Our Lenten series explores the depths of love as we journey to the cross. Each week we take we reflect on the love that Christ has shown to each of us. And each week we take another step closer to standing at the foot of the cross.

February 18th – Has Come Near February 25th – For the Sake of the Gospel
 March 3rd – I Will Raise It Up March 10th – Loving the Light
 March 17th – Whoever Serves March 24th – Blessed is the One
 March 29th – Hail, King of the Jews

Prayer List

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|-------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Rev Angie Lee | Bishop Frank Beard | Our Conference | Eric Veach |
| Ed & Verna Titus | Henry Catey | Jake Kiser | Cindy Cisney |
| Tricia Adkins | Don Stewart | Ronnie Winstead | Lauren Stewart |
| Tom Finley | Laura Carlen | Rosie Chancellor | Chuck Hogan |
| Richard Durham | Kathy Hanks | Emily Blade | Tim Schnauz |
| Donna Carlen | Ernie Peters | Jess Shoot | Stanley Kiser |
| Corine Howard | Don Gilmore | Shirley Jester | Marsha Overton |
| Linda Carlen | Michael Nichols | Paul Cox | Taylor Waldorf |
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| Mandy Schumacher | Ann McMorris | Marci Cutts Smith | Jaydelyn Brassard |
| Pat Hayden Titus | Devona Dittamore | Nancy McElravy | Jeff & Laurie Davidson |
| Family of Brad Anderson | Marie R. | Connie Brown | Thelma Ball |
| Stephanie Strewsbury | Family of Ed Davis | Amanda Stults Charter | Gary & Mary Winterrowd |
| Leo Smith | Sue & Bob Smyser | Larry Thompson | Evelyn Sue Icenogle |
| Greg Williams | Jim & Kay Wells | | |

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