

## **Whoever Serves**

Depths of Love: Part 5 “Whoever Serves”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – March 17, 2024

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

**Readings:** Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

**Reflection:** Psalm 22

**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 22

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame. But I am a worm and not human, scorned by others and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they sneer at me; they shake their heads; “Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver— let him rescue the one in whom he delights!” Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near, and there is no one to help. Many bulls encircle me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death. For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they bound my hands and feet. I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots. From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord. May your hearts live forever! All the ends of the earth shall remember*

*and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations. To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.*

*(Psalm 22:1-18;25-31 NRSV\*)*

We read the words of Psalm 22, and we hear of trusting in God even in our darkest hour. That even in our struggles we should remember that the Lord is with us. Do you remember God in your difficulties? How can you share the presence of Christ in times of sorrow? Who can you lift up in 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 Jeremiah chapter 31, verse 31 through 34.

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31-34 NRSV\*)*

Our next reading is from Hebrews chapter 5, verses 5 through 10.

*So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you”; as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered*

*up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. (Hebrews 5:5-10 NRSV\*)*

Our final reading is from John chapter 12, verses 20 through 33.

*Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew, then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say: 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. (John 12:20-33 NRSV\*)*

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

Today we continue exploring the depths of love as part of Lent. As we are nearing the end of the Lenten season, we get ever closer to the cross. As we do so, we see Christ recognizing and describing what is to come. But we see that Jesus does not shy away from what must be, but instead explains why it must be. This paints for us a picture that shows an understanding of the depths of God's love to the point of great sacrifice. All so that we could understand that love. That all of this is done for our sake so that we can see, and we can know. Our readings today reflect this in the idea of God doing something new for his people. In John's Gospel we see Jesus trying to prepare his followers so that they can understand the crucifixion and the resurrection. Jesus talks about how it is time for the Son of Man to be glorified. One way he explains it is that a single grain of wheat is nothing until it falls to the earth to die, which will lead to much fruit. That Jesus' death will mirror this, that his death will lead to salvation for many. We also get one of the reversal of fortune statements that are so common in the gospels. But this one can be a little confusing for us. I think it is the wording used, that whoever loves their life loses it and those that hate life will keep it for eternal life. But I think it is important for us to reflect on this. Because I don't think it is really about hating life itself, hating the gift of life that God has given us. I think the point is that you turn your back on the pressures of this world, the pressure that we have to be selfish. When we turn our backs on worldly things, the selfish desires for the wealth of things, then you have set your sights on the gift of eternal life. I say this because I don't want us to think that we hate the gift of life we have

been given and lose track of God's love. Because when we forget the depths of God's love, we lose sight of Christ. Because everything Christ does is out of that great love. It is out of that great love that he says that whoever serves has to follow him. We cannot serve if we cannot follow, and we cannot follow if we cannot love.

It is here I break off to sidestep into our other readings today. Jeremiah gives us sort of this insight into what Jesus is really preparing everyone for. It is this new covenant, this new promise, where the laws will be imprinted on our hearts. It's not that we will chase after the law to know God, but that we will know God in our hearts. That we will not have to seek out God from afar because God is with us. And I bring us back to something I asked you to carry with you throughout the year. Yes, I want you to think back on those Christmas feelings that we explored. You may wonder why in Lent I am harkening back to Christmas, but it's because I wanted to remind us of our Emmanuel, God with us. I wanted to call up those feelings now because they help us to prepare for the sorrow we have. That in our time of remembrance of that sacrifice, it helps us to remember the promise that God is with us. This gift that we have is written on our hearts. That we remember the joy even as we experience the sorrow, feeling the pain in order to truly understand that joy. We hear echoes of this again in Hebrews. Some of the same feelings from Jeremiah are here. Hebrews talks about the obedience of Christ there as an example for us. That Christ takes the place of a High Priest, not asking us for sacrifices, but a right heart. Not asking us to be people of the law, judging one another under the law, but to be people of love, understanding God's love for us so that we may love each other.

It's here we return to John. Jesus is talking about whoever serves has to follow. But we have a sorrow that comes with what Jesus is teaching. Jesus' soul is troubled. He asks if he should be turning to his father and asking to be saved from this fate. But he refuses to turn away from what must happen. That he will face the crucifixion. This is the reason he has been doing everything and he will not turn away from God's purpose now. He turns to the Father and says, "glorify your name." And the voice comes from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." And the crowd is astonished and doesn't know where the voice has come from, debating if it was a voice or if it was thunder. But Jesus says something that is telling in all of this. "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine." Christ is already assured. Christ has already glorified God's name. He is sure in the love that is driving him and is sure in sharing the love that will take him to the cross. And we hear echoes of what we heard last week. "When I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." We have that same foreshadowing of his death that we had in remembering Moses lifting up a serpent in the wilderness. A path that he takes on willingly. And so, the question becomes "how willing are we to follow?" Because if we are to serve, then that's what we're called to do. Whoever serves must follow. Because where Jesus is that is where the servant will be. And if we are servants of the Lord, then we need to be where he is. And it begs the question then: where will Jesus be? And I think we know the answer to that question. Jesus will be where love is needed. And that is where we must be.

We are quickly coming to the end of our Lenten season. And this means we are one step closer to the crucifixion. One step closer to the greatest act of love that one can give. The whole and complete giving up of oneself for others. We have been talking about this idea of being able to give up self as part of Lent. Because it is in letting go of all of our selfish desires that we truly serve Christ. Because we see his example and we emulate it. We see the love that he has for all people, and we share it. We see the kindness, and the mercy, and the grace, and we grow in them. That we let go of our preconceived notions about others and we strive to be more loving, more kind, and more caring because we understand the great love of the Father, demonstrated in the death of the Son. So, as we prepare ourselves for the sorrow of the cross, we do so in order to fully understand God's great love for us so that we can understand the depths of that love. And we do so that we can truly cherish it. Because you cherish that love in your heart you let it grow. You let it become part of you. Because every time that we give up of self so that we may love one another, we are sharing in the love that Christ has shown us. Every time that we let go of selfish desires to be able to help those in need, we are giving up of self to love as Christ has loved us. I want us to be able to remember that, because it means that even when we are struggling, that we struggle knowing Christ is never far from us. Because if we are following Christ in love, Christ is never far from us. Because where he is we will be also. Because whoever serves will follow and whoever follows will never be far behind. We will never be far from that caring love and compassion, far from that mercy and grace. We will never be far from the sacrifice made so that we can live. That we can all live in peace. Christ resigned himself to this purpose knowing there was sorrow ahead. He moved forward because he knew there was love.

I think it's important for us to remember that because it means that even if we are in times of sorrow we may see love. When we struggle, we may know peace. When we face hardship, we may know compassion. And that we may never forget our God is with us. With us in our pain and our heartache. With us in our struggles and in our grief. Always, Christ is there. In whatever difficulty we face, Christ is there. Knowing that Christ is with us in every struggle and every difficulty, I feel that much more called to follow. That we should take up our cross and follow so that we may bear witness to the sacrifice. That we can bear witness to that great love. Because when we know it so deeply and so personally, it becomes ingrained on our hearts and becomes how we live, knowing that from great sorrow comes great joy. So that we may share love with one another. That we may share peace with one another. And that we may share hope with one another in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So, take up that cross and follow. Follow because you serve a God full of steadfast love and faithfulness. A God whose compassion endures forever. Follow knowing Christ always has and always will be with us. From this life to the next, and forevermore. 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**

Rev Angie Lee	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Eric Veach
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Donna Carlen	Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Stanley Kiser
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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	Larry Thompson	Greg Williams	Jim & Kay Wells

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