

John 21:4-17
February 12, 2017

“Loved and Forgiven”

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So you probably noticed I did not read the Second reading listed in the bulletin this morning. If you looked ahead you may have some understanding why? Let me tell you a story to try to explain. Rev. Patricia De Jong, a Retired Colleague in the UCC, tells of a long distance bible study she use to conduct with an internationally renowned preacher. A man with such courage he never backed away from a challenging bible story. Rev. William Sloane Coffin was Senior Pastor of Historic Riverside Church in New York City. One day in preparation for this passage from Matthew, Patricia called William to ask how he would approach it. The fearless renown preacher replied, “Are you sure you want to get into all that stuff?” So even though I spent much of this past week getting into all that stuff, even though I wrote a full sermon on that text, I felt the Spirit of God working through Rev. William Sloane Coffin, and decided not to “get into all that stuff” this morning. It is one of those very tough passages, especially to deal with in a preaching setting where there isn’t room for questions, commentary, and response. Instead I invite you to a pre-Valentine’s Day message from God, to all of us.

Back in 1965, Hal David wrote lyrics to a tune composed by Burt Bacharach called, “What the world needs now, is love sweet love.” First recorded by Jackie Deshannon, the song has a long history of being recorded, and it has been widely used in pop culture. Most recently the song was sung in 2013 by American Idol contestant Kree Harrison, and as recently as last year a version was recorded by the Mighty Mighty Bosstones. It was also recorded by *Broadway for Orlando* a few months after the nightclub attack in Orlando, FL and all the profits were donated to victims of that tragedy.

I want to invite you to hear the words of the refrain, “What the world needs now, is love, sweet love, it’s the only thing that there’s just too little of. What the world needs now, is love, sweet love. No, not just for some, but for everyone.” I love that syncopated “no, not just for some...” at the end.

Last year I attended a church conference in Orlando. It brought together some of the best and brightest ways to encourage stewardship in local congregations.

One of the worships I attended was titled “Preaching Stewardship.” Our workshop leader spent the entire hour trying to convince us that people who attend worship don’t give very well because the church fails to preach clearly and regularly that everyone is deeply loved and completely forgiven. He called these the two fundamental messages of scripture. At one point he said, “If people in the pews each Sunday don’t understand how deeply and completely they are loved and forgiven; they don’t have the spiritual resources to go back into the world where they encounter criticism, judgement, and self-doubt; where they are broken-down and make mistakes; and where the ways we hurt each other never seem to get resolved.” After saying this different ways for nearly an hour he said it one last time in closing, “The church is failing in

stewardship because we are failing to assure and reassure people they are unconditionally loved and forgiven.”

John 3:16 seems a good place to start. A passage so widely known people hold up signs at Sporting events; “For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only son... not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved.” I sometimes wonder if we know this passage so well we take it for granted; and if so, does it lose some of its tremendous power. So pause a moment, allowing this message to sink in, let’s move beyond hearing and feel the tremendous gift God sent... a son, even at the expense of suffering and death, to help us understand this amazing, undying and unconditional love. In a world where love seems based on criteria and production, God’s love falls like sunshine upon all of creation.

Then, a little later in the 8th chapter of John’s gospel, we meet a woman who has been caught in adultery, we might wonder why the man wasn’t hauled in too, but she is brought to the Pharisees and they are preparing a crowd to stone her to death. Jesus enters the crowd who is ready to execute punishment and he says, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her.” Slowly the crowd disperses without casting a single stone. We can imagine the life-long response this woman made to this moment of grace in her life. If it were us would we not spend every minute of every day and night telling others how we were set free by God’s magnificent grace. Our stewardship grows from our thankfulness to God, we can only imagine how many new and abundant ways this woman found to share her time, talent and treasure so others could know the same, Amazing Grace. It began when she realized how fully she was loved and forgiven.

Then later in John’s gospel, after the resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples and we already know Peter has blown it. In fear for his life, waiting in the courtyard as Jesus underwent trial, Peter blatantly lied about being a follower of Jesus’. Three times he denied he even knew who Jesus was. He had fallen away. Yet after the resurrection Jesus gives Peter another chance, he asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” and Peter says, “Yes, Yes, and Yes.”

The response of Peter to that powerful moment of forgiveness and reconciliation is documented in the book of Acts. Peter takes his message far and wide telling others about Christ’s resurrection and God’s salvation offered to the whole world. How could Peter preach this message with such power and conviction.... He had a story, “Salvation happened to me, I totally messed up but Jesus took me back.”

I don’t know why but throughout my preparation for this preaching moment, I kept thinking of songs from my childhood watching Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood. Rev. Fred Rogers focused on helping children improve their self-esteem, be happy, and know they are loved. One song especially came back to me, “It’s you I like, It’s not the things you wear, It’s not the way you do your hair. But it’s you I like. The way you are right now, The way down deep inside you. Not the things that hide you, Not your toys, They’re just beside you.

But it's you I like. Every part of you. Your skin, your eyes, your feelings. Whether old or new. I hope that you'll remember even when you're feeling blue. That it's you I like, It's you, yourself It's you.”

This is a another way of sharing the ancient truth God offers to each of us... the truth God has bestowed upon every living creature since the very beginning, “You are my child, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.”

Happy Valentine’s Day! Amen!