

God Loves Me Why?

Scripture: Ephesians 2:1 – 9
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As I wrote my covenant this year I finally gave up fighting with the Holy Spirit – who has been not so subtle lately – and committed to give a sermon. Then Chip actually called me and asked me to live up to my covenanted commitment. And to tell you the truth the last couple of weeks I have been saying to myself “what where you thinking”.

We have a wonderful tradition at this Church that once a quarter or so the ministers request one of the members to give the message on Sunday. So if this is your first Sunday worshipping with us I apologize in advance if this is not what you were hoping for this morning but do invite you to come back and try us again.

Well, anyway, when I wrote my covenant I didn't expect to be standing up here in the middle of lent either. Lent is such a sacred time to me. I grew up Catholic and our family always took it so seriously. When Chip told me the date he wanted me to stand up here - I thought he was out of his mind – I can't preach during lent! I told him what him already knew lent is a time of repentance and atonement. I can't talk about those things. I am the worst sinner I know – I guess I should really say I'm the best sinner I know – I mean I am really, really, good at it.

I told him the old joke about when I go to heaven...

I see all of these clocks. There where so many of them. I asked Peter – because in my heaven Peter is at the gate (you can have whoever you want to at your gate) –

“Peter what are all these clocks?” He said, “They are not clocks they are sin meters.” “Sin meters,” I said and looked more closely. One was labeled Rick Warren and his meter was moving very slowly, then there was one for Pope Benedict and his was moving slowly too so I asked Peter, “where is my sin meter?” He said, “Well, Les yours is in my office I use it as a fan!

Chip was really nice. He laughed at my joke and said I didn't have to talk about repentance or atonement. I said great! He said maybe you should talk about Ephesians 2. And after our conversation I went and found my Bible...had to look for it you know. I hadn't picked it up since last week's Bible Study. Anyway, I found Ephesians and read the first line of the second chapter, “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins.”

I found that fist line translated so wonderfully by Eugene Petersen in The Message – “It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin”. Well I would have been insulted by Chip's suggestion to give the sermon on this passage if it hadn't been so true. Then I read some more...”But God being rich in mercy, because of His great love... even when we were dead in our transgressions, He made us alive together with Christ.”

So, that's what I am here to talk about today while Chip and Heather are away on a Bible Study Retreat. I am here today *not* to talk about how to repent or atone, or even to remind you of the disciplines we should undertake to prepare ourselves for Holy Week and Easter. I am here today, to talk out with you my thoughts on why in the world would the Creator would even bother with a lent, a holy week or an Easter?

No matter how long I have been trying to follow Christ, this time of year comes as such a surprise. Not that it creeps up on me without my noticing. But that I am *shocked each time I think about what God has done for us in Christ.*

What a completely insane thing for God to do – to send us Jesus – down into our darkness in order to allow us to be ALIVE together.

Why even bother? Why would God do such a thing? Of course, we all know what the rote answer is: God loves us. Well, for me that is such a pat answer. To me is just something that we all heard in Sunday school. To me that was what the nuns told us with their sweet faces sticking out from the really scary black and white head dress thing. And all I could think of while they were telling us this - *is if God loves you lady – why is he making you wear that crazy hat!*

So just telling me God loves me so much he sent his only son... (blah, blah) well that is not enough for me to understand the magnitude of God's insane decision. Reading and hearing it over and over is not enough for me to understand it – to actually BELIVE it. Is it enough for you?

I am the type of person who has to look at all sides of a statement. I mean I have look at who said (or wrote) it. What was their motivation to tell me such a thing? Generally, I have to get to the bottom of the statement. I cannot just take it at face value. I mean I am the type of person who analyzes what exactly a friend meant when she said to me “you look good today”. Did she mean every other day I look like a hag? Or did she mean I look good today.

So a statement like God loves you... Now that statement takes some analyzing!

Here is Paul essentially saying to me, “Les, you’ve been running around living your life doing what you feel like doing. It’s a wonder God did not give up on you - with all the stuff you’ve been into. But instead, with immense mercy and incredible love, He GOD embraces you. He takes you and your sin filled - meter spinning - life and makes you one with Him through Christ. No help from you, Les, He just picks you up and sets you with Him in heavenly places”.

My next thought – is Paul, “you out of your mind!”

Why would God do this – make known a man who is so connected to the Spirit that He can bridge the gap between us and the Creator? Why is it so important to God that we

move from dead to alive here on Earth? Pretty deep questions eh? Didn't think I could be that deep did you? Especially with that meter noise whizzing around in my head.

And the Holy Spirit - who always has the funniest responses – says to me if *Jesus*, after three years worth of teaching, can't explain it to you and *Paul* with umpteen years worth of letter writing can't explain it to you – how in the world is Leslie ever going to come to an understanding of this love? And I say back to the Spirit – let me experience it! Make it real to me!

So patiently I waited for an understanding of God's love. I milled around a couple of churches. Hung out with some of the catholic priests from my youth, then tried the up beat – rock and roll singing new-wave church, even started watching those really entertaining guys and gals on evangelical television.

I learned a lot but I never did get an understanding of how much God loved US. Why would God bother with us? We children of wrath who are dead. Especially me who is so wrapped up in my desires of the flesh. Why would God want to make us ALIVE, make ME ALIVE again through the death and resurrection of Jesus?

Some would argue that God's intelligence is so great that we could never understand why He does something. Then my argument back is if He does not want us to understand it why did He send Jesus to try to tell us? Why send someone who may show us how to bridge this divide between the Creator and us? Why does God love us that much?

Then I had a kid... and this kid wasn't all he was cracked up to be. I mean he was a lot of work. He needed all of my attention, all of my spare time, and a whole lot of my money. And the older he got the more work, energy, attention, and money he demanded from me... you guys thought that I was going to say the I had a kid and finally understood how much God love me because of how much I loved my kid right?

Well I'm so dense, THAT didn't even sink in. I love Ian as much as the next mom loves her child but I am not ALIVE in him like what Paul was telling me. Ian isn't the end all be all. In fact the more I pushed him out away from me the better individual he has become. So that wasn't the kind of love Jesus came to show me. Paul says that this great *love, this incredible mercy, this amazing grace is a gift from God to raise us up to Him, to sit next to Him for the ages to come*. I don't want Ian to sit next to me for ages to come – I want him to find his own seat!

Why, why, why would God love us? Why does He want us to be ALIVE?

Well let me tell you there has not been an I GOT IT moment on this one. This statement of love and mercy is so deep that it has had to CREEP out from underneath my skin. I have experienced it so slowly that I hadn't even realized that I got it until I had to write this down and tell you guys about it.

When I put my head to it I think I started to realize the depth of God's love when I started coming to this Church. This Church accepted my son first by allowing him into the Wednesday afternoon LOGOS program. Through that program I met some fantastic ladies and since I was new to the neighborhood, I forced myself into their friendship. Truly forced – you can ask Kathy Kipp, Allison Carr, Carolyn Gaylord, and Kathi Ramming how I just kept inserting myself into their lives. I called them twice a week – whatcha doing? Can I help you in any way? They were patient with me... just waiting I am sure to see what this broad wanted from them. But when they notice how persistent I was and how much I maybe could use a friend they opened their doors and hearts wider. And the wider their hearts opened the wider my heart opened.

Then came the Monday morning Bible Study with Chip and a different set of ladies. And that was a whole separate dynamic. Studying the Bible with someone who would actually **a) allow me to ask a question, and b) tied to answer it not just give me the pat answers like Sister Mary Margaret with the funny hat.** Chip would provide real life answers. Answers I could chew on and spit back out at him the next Monday morning...all that time with the ladies in the study while they were probably wondering where did this one come from? Patiently they waited while I ask and Chip answered the same questions over and over until I got my OWN answers. And imagine what a treat that was for someone like me looking for answers real answers – of course those answers have lead to more and more questions. I'll have the thank Chip for that later.

Then I took a chance and I went on a women's retreat and I'll never forget what Carolyn Gaylord told me after I shared some of my feelings in one of our small groups. Carolyn said, "God doesn't want you to be who *you think He wants you to be*. He wants you to be WHO you ARE – who he MADE you to be". And that just blew my ever love'n mind! All I could think of how wrong she was, God just wants me to love everyone and be so nice and know all the scripture by heart and everything. To tell you the truth I thought Carolyn was real a whack job.

Until I took some more risks – I started talking to my friends about God. I started a monthly Bible Study in my home. In my home – told my husband that one Friday night a month our home was going to be open to anyone who wanted to come over and ask questions about God. Don is such a good sport! But what a change I have seen in *myself* since I gave up the one Friday night for my friends (for God).

And now I guess I realize what Paul is talking about. Paul is talking about God's desire GOD'S LOVE FOR US is the hope that the gap between us and Him be bridged by Jesus on the cross. God's love for us is manifested in Jesus. Because without Jesus I don't think that most of us would realize that God is REAL. Without Jesus - a real man - coming down to try to tell about this Spirit who created and loves us I would not have bothered to THINK about God. And, without Jesus' total obedience to God, obedient to the end for God and for us. I would not have taken GOD so seriously. I would have gone on living my life as if it didn't matter, as if I wasn't loved by the Creator, as if in the end I just went back to being dust...

Without Jesus I would NEVER have understood that that small fluttering feeling we get in our chest when we hear something that rings so true to us. Or the goose bumps we feel after hugging a friend in need or the power we experience when we try something new because we know it is right thing to do. I would have never come to realize those things are all signs of coming ALIVE. Coming alive in our own way – not how we think we should be alive (that is when we are most dead). But coming alive in who we truly are – just like Carolyn pointed out. And the more we become who we really are the more ALIVE we become and the more God rejoices in us.

So when I think about Lent, Holy Week, and Easter this year. I think about it in a whole new way. I am not thinking about sin, repentance, and atonement. I am thinking about love and hope. God's love and hope for me... you and me to BECOME ALIVE here and FEEL deeply, deeply loved.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Great Spirit, and Creator we cannot thank you enough for Jesus. We cannot thank you enough for the incredible, unending love you offer to us. We can only hope to delight you with how alive we choose to be while we are here. Help us by pouring your Spirit into us more and more each time we try to open up to you. Give us this grace that Paul wrote to the Ephesians about in order that we may become more fully who you created us to be...and we continue our prayer with the word Jesus left us...

Benediction:

Go and become ALIVE in Christ this week and may the Spirit He left for us walk with you!