

Just Love

The final sermon in the 2009 stewardship focus:
New Love, New Mercy

Psalm 116.1-14

October 18, 2009

God came to my house and asked for charity.
And I fell on my knees and cried, "Beloved,
what may I give?" "Just love," He said.
"Just love."

- St. Francis of Assisi

The Reading

I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. ²Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live. ³The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. ⁴Then I called on the name of the Lord: 'O Lord, I pray, save my life!' ⁵Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful. ⁶The Lord protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. ⁷Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. ⁸For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. ⁹I walk before the Lord in the land of the living. ¹⁰I kept my faith, even when I said, 'I am greatly afflicted'; ¹¹I said in my consternation, 'Everyone is a liar.' ¹²What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? ¹³I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord, ¹⁴I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.

"Whatever I have, or have not; whatever I am, or am not, I can make it through anything now in the one who makes me who I am." These words form the chorus of a song written by Ken Medema for the stewardship focus in which we have been engaged for the last several weeks. It has been a most unusual stewardship focus, I will be the first to admit; but I hasten to add that I feel very good about the approach we have taken. I always sense something missing in a traditional stewardship focus, because it is usually a thinly veiled fund raiser, designed to do nothing more than motivate check writing. Now a little caveat here; I ain't sayin' don't write checks, no ma'am. I ain't sayin' forget about giving, because ministry comes with a price tag, and finances play a role in stewardship. It is not, however, the leading role; and it is not the

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most important. This role is reserved for the spiritual aspect of stewardship – our personal commitment to God - because stewardship and our spiritual lives are one and the same; you could almost say they're synonymous. So if we have done nothing more during this stewardship focus than to communicate to you that stewardship is about so much more than fund raising, we will have succeeded.

Stewardship is more about fun raising than fund raising, because stewardship is nothing more than the response of a grateful heart to God for all of the goodness God has bestowed on it. And when we stop, when we actually think about it, we realize that that's a bunch of goodness. We could also say that stewardship is the practical side of our spiritual lives; it is the expression of life in the Spirit. That is why we have considered spiritual topics in our stewardship focus; topics such as repentance, personal reconciliation, transformation, and courage in the face of adversity. We need to delve into these spiritual topics, because they are indispensable to the spiritual life, and yet we harbor so many misconceptions that we avoid them like the plague.

We avoid such spiritual topics because of bad experiences in the past, or because we still carry around a childlike understanding that won't cut it in the adult world. As I mentioned several weeks ago, some people avoid the topic of repentance, because they see it as a humiliating experience everybody has to go through in order to be a Christian. They see it as some twisted and painful rite of passage. I'm here to tell you, this ain't so! Repentance is really simple and not necessarily painful. It certainly should never be humiliating. Repentance is simply turning to God from those things in my life that are false. It's that simple.

Repentance is not a painful experience we have as a child after which we exclaim, "Thank God, I've got that behind me." Repentance is something that we engage in day after day, and year after year. It's an organic part of our faith; identifying those aspect of our lives that are resistant to God, ineffective, or underdeveloped; opening the deep dark recesses of our hearts to the light of God that will warm and purge them. Repentance is simply turning to love from the mess we so often make of our lives.

The same is true of finding courage in adversity. If you've been there you know it's not easy. When all evidence seems to indicate that God is not in control, when it seems that God

could care less, faith tells us what is true. Deeper than the blindness, deeper than the darkness, deeper than the brokenness, deeper than the pain; lies the presence of God. God's presence is like a rushing river that flows beneath our lives, holding them up and promising life and wholeness through its surging current. God's presence is always yearning to gush forth as courage and hope, healing and wholeness; our role is simply to let it do so. Our role is to give it the occasion to gush forth, and in times of adversity - even in the worst of times – it will do so.

And Lord knows we need to talk about reconciliation and transformation, because we often find ourselves at odds with one another for this reason or that; sometimes they're true, sometimes they're false, sometimes they're real and sometimes they're just flat made up. However that may be, we often find ourselves at odds with others. Correct me if I'm wrong, but in my experience, those times I have been estranged from someone, anyone, more times than not, I have seen that I was first estranged from myself. I have seen that when I don't live my values and honor my commitments, when I loathe myself, when I'm mad at myself, I wind up taking all that out on other people. When I get the beam out of my eye I find it a whole lot easier to let God soothe over and heal the rifts between me and others.

We need to talk about repentance. We need to talk about finding courage in adversity. We need to talk about reconciliation and transformation, because they are all part and parcel of the live of faith. But where do we go from there? How do we tie stewardship consecration in with these spiritual considerations? It's simple. It's very simple as St. Francis saw. God has come to our house and asked for charity. We don't know what to give and respond to God, like St. Francis, with another question, "Beloved, what may I give?" God's response ties it all together, "Just love," God says, "Just love."

Stewardship is the response of a grateful heart that recognizes everything God has done and everything God yearns still to do. A grateful heart recognizes that everything we are and everything we have, we have as a gift from God and our part, our portion, our privilege, is to share that bounty with others day by day. "Whatever I have, or have not; whatever I am, or am not, I can make it through anything now in the one who makes me who I am."