

“No Greater Love”

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?” Isaiah speaks to us about the magnificence of God somewhat incredulous that his readers don’t seem to know. He points out the power of God over nature and over the princes and kings of the earth. He tells us how unfathomable God is. Not only does God “not faint or grow weary,” but God “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.” God is powerful and God can restore us even when we fail.

The psalmist seems to echo Isaiah in his praise of God. In the psalm we hear that God rebuilds Jerusalem, heals the brokenhearted, binds up their wounds, and knows the stars by name. God’s power and majesty are great, but God also cares about each part of the created order. Nothing is outside of God. What’s more the things that we think are amazing—a powerful horse or a strong man—are nothing to God.

In the Gospel we see an even more intimate side of God in the work of Jesus of Nazareth. Last week we began this story with Jesus teaching in the synagogue where he is confronted by a man who is possessed by an unclean spirit. The spirit challenges Jesus saying, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” Jesus then silences the spirit and commands it to come out of the man. (In Mark’s Gospel it is the unclean spirit that is the first one to recognize Jesus as the Holy One of God.) That is where we ended last week.

This week we pick up with Jesus and the disciples immediately heading out to the home of Simon Peter whose mother-in-law is ill with a fever. Jesus goes to her, takes her by the hand, lifts her up and, in an instant, the fever goes away. In fact she feels so restored that she begins to wait on the disciples and Jesus.

Indeed it is as the psalm says. The Lord binds up the wounds of those who are ailing. God also lifts up the lowly (the mother-in-law who is low with fever and also a person of low status), and casts the wicked to the ground (the unclean spirit that is cast out of the man who convulses to the ground).

God is in all that we see, feel, hear, and experience in life. Yet God is also beyond all of that which we perceive. God is to be feared, or better translated God is awesome.

Currently, I have only two things posted on the walls of my office. One is a set of prayers that I say as I get vested for services. The other is a simple quotation. It comes from one of the brothers of the Society of St. John the Evangelist. It reads, “So what does it mean that you are a follower of Jesus?” It is a question I ask myself every day. The answer often changes. Sometimes the answer is very specific to a situation, a person, or a choice. Other times it is more universal, that is, not specific to a person but to how I live my life as a whole.

Let me ask you that question now. We know that God is the creator and sustainer of the universe. We know that God cares for the entire universe from each individual star down to the mother-in-law of a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. Presumably in spite of God’s awesomeness God cares about each one of us here this morning. In response either to that message or to the message as given in the Gospels about Jesus, we have each made the decision on some level to follow. So what?

Let’s take a minute and ponder that. See what comes to mind as your ponder the question “What does it mean that you are a follower of Jesus?” [Count off a minute with prayer and then resume.]

What has come to mind as you pondered the question? No one has to speak and I do not think there are wrong answers. But offer what it might mean to you in this moment that you follow Jesus. Feel free to say a word, a sentence, or more. [Listen for key words that may link together thoughts of service, kindness, joy, peace, love...].

What we have heard I expect also reflects what was not said. There may be nuance to the responses, but let me dare to distill all of them down to one word—love; God’s love for us and our love for God. In the Hebrew Scriptures this concept is contained in the Hebrew word *חֶסֶד* (*hesed*). This word is often translated into English as “lovingkindness.” Other words are also used such as “mercy,” “steadfast love,” “compassion,” and even “goodness.” The concept is that God’s love for creation and, in particular, humanity is kind, gentle, merciful, compassionate, and especially steadfast. God loves us and does not give up on us. God will even sacrifice for humanity as we hear in John 3:16 “God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son.”

This love that we experience from God is not supposed to be something we bask in as if we were the favored child who is also childish (think a 2-3 year-old who thinks s/he is the center of the world). Rather we are called to receive that *hesed*, that lovingkindness, and pay it forward, pass it on, or share it with one another.

In the Bible the archetype for *hesed* is Ruth. In the Book of Ruth there are three women Naomi, Orpah and Ruth who are married to three men all of whom die in quick succession. Naomi the wife of the eldest man and mother of the other two tells her daughters-in-laws to return to their families. One does so, but Ruth tells Naomi “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” Ruth’s steadfast love and kindness to Naomi is our best example of how one human can treat another. What’s more it is given to us not from an Israelite, but a Moabite, one of the enemies of ancient Israel.

This trip through today’s scriptures and other readings shows us how the Bible is in constant conversation with itself and with us. Not just the us of 2,000 or 3,000 years ago, but for the us of today. For we remain called to recognize of God’s love, ponder the effect of God’s love on our individual lives, and to share the knowledge, wonder and joy of that love with each person we meet.

Take Jesus’ hand and get up. Respond to Jesus’ call to come out. Serve the world in your own household, at Seven Loaves or the Andy Bergner Center, in your job, and when you are simply going about your daily chores. Know and share the love that God has given the stars and you. Lead with love and especially *hesed* the love of God that is kind, merciful, steadfast, and full of compassion.

To help us all in this journey of lovingkindness please open the red Book of Common Prayer and turn to page 833. Let us read together the Prayer Attributed to St. Francis.

“Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.”