

Beliefs - What a Disciple Knows

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John 3:16-17

16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Romans 5:8

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Mark 12:29-31

29 “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ 31 The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

(I am fully loved by God.)

Over the course of this ministry year we are talking about discipleship – specifically each of us being about to name at least one other person with whom we are intentionally sharing our lives as Jesus followers.

Pastor Scott at GrX talks about this as a pool party, and he wants to invite us to Jump In!

He then says that he wants to offer three things that will help us take the plunge. He wants to offer pool noodles, kick boards, and inflatables that will help us enjoy our experience – and not sink!

Or put another way, this year we will be exploring the beliefs, virtues, and practices that mark the life of disciple.

The beliefs are those things that a disciple knows. We often hear the word “beliefs” and think of our creeds and confessions. But as we talk about beliefs this year, we mean the core understandings of who we in Christ.

The first belief – the bedrock belief upon which our identity in Christ rests – is that we are fully loved by God.

All that we know and experience of God that is TRUE, and worthy of full TRUST, begins and ends with a ever deepening and widening discovery of our belovedness.

If you have spent a lot of time in church, these three passages will be very familiar to you. We have heard them so many times that it is easy for them to sound somewhat dull. Familiarity breeds contempt, so the saying goes. If we hear about God’s love over and over but do not experience it for ourselves in new and deepening ways, the amazing truths these texts declare can be almost entirely lost on us.

This can even and especially happen to pastors, who spend more time thinking and talking about God’s love than most. The several hours of procrastination that led up to my preparation of this sermon was a clue to me that attempting to speak about God’s love in fresh and insightful ways is more daunting that I might care to admit.

Not only do I feel reluctant to try and say yet more words about God’s love, I confess that I often feel resistant. If I am completely honest with myself, I find it easier to believe in

God's love and desire for others than for myself. Part of me doubts that the sermon I am preaching actually applies to me.

This uncomfortable truth came to me in an unexpected way. I was reading Mark Labberton's well regarded book, *Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today*. Chapter 7 is entitled, "The way of the Beloved," and under the section "The First of First Things" Labberton explains how and why it is that our vocation as followers of Jesus is to be beloved. I began to read the section, and got distracted by some thought. Several minutes later I realized that I couldn't recall any of what I had read. So I started over. Again I only made it a couple paragraphs before I was lost in some other thought and could not remember one word of what I had just read. Some unconscious part of me simply could not take in the words of a thoughtful, compassionate pastor explaining that "The love of God in Jesus Christ is the supreme first thing; no one and nothing rivals or surpasses this." After the fourth or fifth attempt, it dawned on me that I was resisting this message. I could not, or would not, believe it.

Last week we talked about the objections we have about intentionally disciplining others. The three objections we looked at were:

1. It's not the right time for me to do it.
2. I don't know enough to be able to do it.
3. It's just too hard.

And the application I offered to you for the week was this: Notice what objections come up for you. Just notice them. You don't have to talk yourself in or out of anything. Just notice.

The point of this noticing is that, once we notice what is happening we are able to do something about it. Once I noticed that I couldn't take in Dr. Labberton's teaching on belovedness, it started me on an exploration of why. Why is so hard for me to believe that God's love is not conditional, or probationary. Why do I think God will only truly love me IF, or AS LONG AS, or only UNTIL.

And why do I believe that God's love is limited like that for other people too? Especially when John 3 says God's self-giving love is for the whole world, Romans 5 says God's lavish love came to us when we were in open rebellion to it, and Mark 12 makes it plain that God's love inextricably binds us to God and to one another eternally?

I am a pastor, so I have the privilege of hearing other people's stories. And what I have learned is this: Accepting that we are beloved is difficult for just about everyone. Only very young children and very old saints seem have an easy time of it.

But that is not to say that we don't have any hope. Maybe someday we will plumb the depths of this WHY. But until then, we can quite literally take it on faith. We can simply accept the fact of our absolute belovedness, even and especially when we don't feel particularly beloved or worthy to be treated as beloved. Indeed, the moment we make it about our worthiness we can just remember, "Oh, wait: It's not about that."

The wonderful thing about resting in the full and absolute love of God is that we come to realize: It's not about me! And because it's not about me, I get to experience God's love as all about me!

Application for this week: Reflect on and pray Psalm 139

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