

# Love is our Song

Jim Ginn

Pride Sunday, June 26, 2016

Seattle First Baptist Church

Luke 9:57-62 (Inclusive Bible)

57 As they were making their way along, they met a fellow traveler who said to Jesus, "I'll follow you wherever you go." 58 Jesus replied, "Foxes have lairs, the birds of the sky have nests, but the Chosen One has nowhere to rest." 59 To another traveler Jesus said, "Follow me." The traveler replied, "Let me bury my father first." 60 Jesus said in return, "Let the dead bury their dead: you go and proclaim the reign of God everywhere." 61 Yet another traveler approached Jesus in this way: "I'll be your follower, Rabbi, but first let me say goodbye to my people at home." 62 Jesus answered, "Whoever puts a hand to the plow but keeps looking back is unfit for the reign of God."

Hymns:

Opening: We are Marching in the Light of God

Call to Prayer: #456 More Love to You, O Christ

Closing: #76 Sent Forth by God's Blessing

Good Pride Sunday. I am humbled by this opportunity to share with you this morning. For the past two weeks I have been overwhelmed with tides of emotions ranging from despair to rage to resolve, and ultimately, immeasurable gratitude for my life and the nourishing love that enfolds me. Gratitude for the prophetic words and affirming actions from this congregation I call home.

Grief touches all of us. I've been in a season of grieving since my father died last fall. It has been a rich time of introspection, questioning and yearning. I cherish my times of active solitude, whether bicycling through the countryside, backpacking, or cross-country skiing in the quiet forest. At those times I often muse about the deeper meanings of life and death, and the love transcending them. Those musings form the substance of my message today.

Today is Pride Day, a day of celebration for many of us, but also of grief and defiance. It always has been. The point of today's scripture couldn't be more relevant in light of recent events. Jesus instructed his would-be followers to proclaim the Reign of God without hesitation.

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What did Jesus mean by the Reign of God? According to peace activist Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, “The Reign of God is a community of human persons embracing God’s love made present in Jesus. That’s all of us then. What would it look like if all of us really embraced God’s love proclaimed in Jesus and followed His way?”

Jesus commanded his followers to act immediately, putting aside their excuses and delaying tactics. Following Jesus’s way of love would be difficult and would require uncomfortable choices. But it offered the promise of meaning and purpose and hope for a more just world.

Jesus’ metaphor of putting your hand on the plow and never looking back resonates with my agricultural heritage. My parents grew up on family farms in northwestern Missouri. It was Middle America at its middlest. My Grandpa James Whiteaker and his twin brother, John, farmed together. They were known all over Dekalb county for plowing perfectly straight rows using horse-drawn equipment. No modern contour plowing for them. Those straight rows of corn stalks were like quills pointing to the sky symbolizing love for the earth, love for family, and love for the God of abundant life.

A few miles away, the Ginn family also farmed with horses. Dad used to recount a story of when, as a young adult, he wrestled with the call to gospel ministry. The year was 1942. He was planting corn alone in the field when he noticed the seed corn was no longer dropping from the planter into the ground, and apparently hadn’t been for some time. Some crucial chain links had come loose and had fallen into the dirt somewhere in that large field. Here’s the rest of the story in Dad’s words. “I was wearing a straw hat, as all farm boys did at that time. It had a tall, round crown and a wide brim, and all at once a strong gust of wind from the southwest lifted that hat off my head. It sailed down across that field on its brim in the same direction as those cornrows were laid out. I stood and watched that hat as the distance made it become smaller and smaller. All at once, it simply plopped over – crown side up – and stayed there. As I started walking, I was saying, ‘Lord, if you really want me to be a preacher, let those links be under that hat.’ The horses stood still as I walked the distance, reached down, and picked up my hat. And – would you believe it – those links were there! I was back in the business of planting corn.” And without ever looking back Dad spent the next 60 years as

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a Baptist pastor. The love of God was a recurring theme of his sermons and of his life.

That was the earnest and benevolent world into which I was born. My family nurtured me with love and with their steadfast faith. But being gay was a complicating factor. Both realities tugged in conflict for much of my life. It took me years to accept that, in truth, both realities were pulling in the same direction.

But it shouldn't have to take years! Why do we continue to alienate people who are different from us? What causes so many of us to recoil and despise those who fall outside our comfort zones? Why do we leverage our power to rob people of their human dignity? Why do we continue to twist scripture and cling to dogma to justify our unjustifiable behavior? God is Love! Jesus called us to demonstrate to all people that they are fully loved, including those celebrating Pride this month all over the world. And with that love comes the responsibility for them to share love, dignity and justice with the world around them. That's the way love works! The way love wins.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to swim with sea turtles. Finally last year, Jim and I visited the Big Island of Hawaii. The day came for our first snorkeling experience in Honaunau Bay, also known as a sacred Place of Refuge. We trembled with excitement, and a bit of trepidation, as we awkwardly lowered ourselves down two natural lava steps into the sparkling aquamarine water. As we launched ourselves, fins flapping and masks down, we were surrounded by colorful Sea Urchins, Butterflyfish, Parrotfish, Spotted Puffer, Yellow Tang and countless other fish swimming through a garden of corals resembling brains, cauliflower and tentacles. I was immediately enchanted.

Suddenly, Jim tugged at my arm and pointed to a large sea turtle swimming gracefully just a few feet away. Ah, I wanted that moment to last forever. But the spell was abruptly broken when from my peripheral vision I spotted a long, snakelike needlefish swimming directly towards us. We both instinctively recoiled in fear and loathing, and swam for the safety of land! Have you ever tried to scream while wearing a snorkeling mask? It's not pretty!

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Why the fuss? We instinctively reacted to a fish, simply because of the way it looked. We limit ourselves over and over again in this way. But the good news is, we can be better than our instincts and habits. Needlefish are harmless, I later learned. Armed with this knowledge, I didn't fear them the next time we snorkeled. You might say I learned to love the needlefish.

Love of the stranger can often be difficult. It pushes our buttons. We get scared. According to Christian blogger, Misty Irons, "some ... Christians speak of love somewhat cynically and even disparagingly, as if love is the mushy watchword of those who have no interest in doctrine and objective truth. What it boils down to is that they are afraid to obey God's command to love fully because they fear it may open the door to discrediting God's word." Okay. But didn't Jesus say love is the most important thing we can do? The judgmental saying, "love the sinner, but hate the sin" shows a dangerous lack of understanding, and it robs people of their dignity. That is not an opinion, it's a fact. Silence in the face of injustice also falls short. We don't always know where unconditional love is going to lead. But as we mature in our ability to love, we can begin to accept uncertainty and incomplete knowledge, and can refine our beliefs as new evidence emerges. Open observation enables us to learn and grow.

Just a few days after our encounter with the sea turtles and the needlefish, I had another even more profound experience. This time we were atop Mauna Kea, the tallest mountain in the world, when measured from its base at the ocean floor.

The snow-capped summit of this dormant volcano has long been considered the most sacred place in the Hawaiian archipelago. It is also covered with the world's most powerful deep space observatories. At sunset, I sat transfixed as the sun melted like liquid gold across the horizon of the vast Pacific Ocean. As the final light winked out the observatories came to life. One by one, powerful motors opened enormous domes to expose telescopes to the darkening skies.

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As we viewed the night sky through a much smaller telescope, we were thrilled by viewing the moon's craters, Saturn's rings and Jupiter's moons. But the image that is seared into my memory is that of the entire Messier 82 Galaxy in the Ursa Major or Big Bear Constellation, 12.8 million light years away, and five times more luminous than our own Milky Way Galaxy. The observable universe contains at least one hundred billion such galaxies.

I've always been curious about the universe and fascinated by science. I was a math major in college, and taught calculus in grad school. I also studied physics with Dr. Wallace Hilton, who was named the top physics professor in America in the late 70's. This great man of faith brought physics to life.

Math and science have revealed much about our universe. And we learn more every day. But we don't know everything. When I glimpsed M82 a sense of awe overcame me. Researchers describe awe as "that sense of wonder we feel in the presence of something vast that transcends our understanding of the world." We commonly experience awe in nature, but we can also feel a sense of awe in response to things like religion, art and music. Recent scientific studies have demonstrated that experiencing a sense of awe promotes altruism, magnanimous behavior, and loving-kindness. Without awe, love is impossible. What the world needs now is awe.

The universe is awesome, but it is not always kind, as we have been painfully reminded. Suffering is real, and it's personal. Not too many years ago, I descended into my own dark hell. I could find temporary relief in only two ways. One was medicine-induced sleep. The other was playing alone at that organ console in the twilight. I would begin a Bach fugue with the sound of soft flutes, losing myself in the rich, intricate rhythms and harmonies. I would gradually add stops until finally the glorious sounds of the full organ rang throughout this empty space.

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Then I would sit in the silent darkness and gaze at the jewel-toned windows surrounding me. I envisioned each piece of stained glass as a symbol of a saint who had shown me love and compassion. There was my sixth grade teacher who taught a timid boy, out of place in this world, how to stand up for himself. My family, all of them, who put wind under my wings with their love. My pastors and congregation at Seattle First Baptist Church who welcomed and affirmed me and my marriage. I truly felt surrounded by a cloud of witnesses.

In the waning light, my eyes were drawn to the brilliant nativity window. In my deepest pain the window's symbolism came alive. Jesus was the incarnation of love. The bright star symbolizing his birth also bears the shape of the cross where [hear this] he was murdered because of his radical love. Over two thousand years later his message of love lives on. That's because he trusted each of us to keep love alive.

By example, there is one other person I want to mention. One evening, when my pain had gone on far too long, I sat sobbing in despair with Jim Segaar. I choked out the words, "how can you stand to be around me like this?" He turned to me and said, "Don't you understand? I love you." At that moment a small flame of hope ignited in me. And it continues to burn.

Last fall, Jim and I abruptly ended our bicycle tour of Spain so I could rush to my dying father's side. Those final four days with Dad were a priceless gift. A few months after he died I wrote these words...

"Dad, you called out for me a short time before you died. I desperately wanted to understand what you were trying to tell me. But I was paralyzed with shock and grief. The best I could muster was to tell you I loved you and I knew you loved me.

You went to sleep, and my life was changed forever. I sat with your body for what seemed like hours. I kissed your forehead as you had kissed mine on the day of my birth.

You visited me that night. You had no spectral visage, and you spoke no words. But I began to understand.

Oh my soul, I miss you. But it is well with my soul. I heard you. I am finding the voice you helped nurture in me. I will not be silent."

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Dad's message that night was clear, "Don't you understand? You are my son, and I am proud of you. I will always love you. Don't be afraid. Be who you are called to be."

So today I share with you my authentic truth, the best I can. Many things I still don't fully understand. But I want to learn. I have no desire to live forever. But I believe love will. My immense gratitude and joy for this abundant life is not contingent on an expectation to be reunited some day with my father and other people I have loved. But here's the thing. Almost every day I savor Dad's presence. I hear him in music; I smell him in wood smoke; I see him in red roses and in the eyes of those whose lives he touched and in whom his love lives on. His love is as strong today as it ever was.

And so it is with God's love.

It reaches to the highest star. It meets us in our darkest hell. It is eternal. Love is our song.

"The love of God is greater far  
Than tongue or pen can ever tell;  
It goes beyond the highest star,  
And reaches to our lowest hell;

Oh, love of God, how rich and pure!  
How measureless and strong!  
It shall forevermore endure—  
The saints' and angels' song.

Could we with ink the ocean fill,  
And were the skies of parchment made,  
Were every stalk on earth a quill,  
And everyone a scribe by trade;  
To write the love of God above  
Would drain the ocean dry;

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Nor could the scroll contain the whole,  
Though stretched from sky to sky.

Oh, love of God, how rich and pure!  
How measureless and strong!  
It shall forevermore endure—  
The saints' and angels' song.”

It's our song. Don't be afraid. Love wins! Let's be who we are called to be, both now and forever.

Notes:

- Song: *The Love of God*, traditional