



Sermon, May 16, 2021
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Junction City United Methodist Church

Sermon Series: Parting Thoughts

“You Are All Precious to God”

Scripture: Luke 12:22-34

²² He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. ²³ For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. ²⁴ Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! ²⁵ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁶ If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? ²⁷ Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ²⁸ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! ²⁹ And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. ³⁰ For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹ Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

³² “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

A number of years ago, my mother told me an interesting and illuminating story about me when I was still fairly young. Apparently, I noticed one day that she was handing out hugs to my younger brothers but not me (We were all still very young). This bothered me. I asked why she didn’t give me a hug as well. She replied that when she tried to hug me I would pull away and act like I didn’t want a hug. I thought for a moment, and then said, “But I do want a hug,” whereupon she hugged me just like my brothers. I learned something from that experience:

1. I, too, like everyone else, wanted to know that I was loved and was precious to my parents;
2. I can be my own worst enemy and greatest barrier to receiving the love and acceptance I crave deep down.

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This human craving for love, acceptance, and acknowledgement of our value is well-nigh universal, with possible exceptions to certain sociopaths, and we aren't certain about what makes a sociopath. Because it is built into the human psyche so intimately, this basic human drive to be loved and accepted colors almost everything we do, and is a central part of our religious and spiritual quest. Consider the following examples in the Bible alone:

1. Abel's sacrifice was acceptable to God, but Cain's wasn't.
2. Joseph receives the adulation and approval of his father, which makes his brothers jealous.
3. The importance of receiving the patriarch's blessing (Abraham to Isaac, Isaac to Jacob rather than Esau (due to trickery), etc.
4. The many, many Psalms about seeking God's acceptance, how to be right in the sight of God, offering acceptable sacrifices, offering a broken heart, seeking forgiveness, etc.

Can you think of other examples from the Bible? Can you think of examples from contemporary culture or your own experience?

The entire sacrificial system in the Hebrew Scriptures is based on the idea that there is something wrong with human beings, or that we offend God with our actions, and so we need to make amends for it by sacrificing something of our possessions or our livelihood. In essence, we needed to earn God's approval. Think of how this has infected so much religious thinking down through the ages. Did you get told this growing up?

Jesus came to show us something different. Here is a summation of Jesus' message:

- The Unfailing, unmitigated, undiminished love of God the Father for all will-constituted creatures,
- all human beings are members of one family,
- and the greatest expression and response of that love is in service to others.

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Jesus came to show us a deity who was spirit in nature and being, and that was characterized first and foremost by love. In order to do that, he used the imagery of a loving parent:

- Prodigal son
- What parent gives a snake instead of bread?
- God’s eye is on the sparrow, are you not of greater value?
- It is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom;
- Going after the one lost sheep
- Can you think of others?

All of these stories illustrate the devotion of God to each one of us – every human being, and every will-endowed creature across the universe. God does not delight in the death or extinction of any of us, and has set up the universe so that every way possible is available to us to come to know and grow into our eternal destinies. Every way possible is made available to us to grow in love and service to others here in our lives on earth in order to experience the love of God in our personal lives. What’s more, we learn more about that love of God for us by expressing it to others in loving service.

Think about all the things you do through the church and other organizations that in loving service to others:

- Just Breakfasts, and any other time we prepare meals for others
- Clothing give-away
- Sponsorship of families to help them get a foothold in life
- Think about our care for one another, or for the neighbors around us
- Think about collecting money to send to UMCOR, making blankets to give to the Fire Department or elsewhere
- Can you name some examples of God’s love in action?

Jesus freely and ceaselessly gave out to everyone who would receive his message, the assurance of God’s love to everyone. We are already loved and accepted by God. We don’t have to do anything to earn that love and acceptance. It is the starting point of all reality. All the teachings you might

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have received growing up, or maybe in reading, or maybe from a preacher that you aren't living up to God's standards and therefore are rejected by God or are being punished by God for what you have done and who you are, or any other such expression are **WRONG**. God knows we are imperfect creatures who are learning, growing, making mistakes, falling down, getting lost. God is ever-ready and always available to help us return to the path of becoming the best we can be, to lovingly guide us back onto the path of eternal growth in love – journeying towards Christian Perfection is how John Wesley put it.

We are all of us precious to God. Jesus said not to worry about your life. God takes care of the birds of the air and clothes the grass of the field. You are of so much greater value to God. Do not worry about measuring up to God – you are already in. God has put the universe together so that each of us can grow and mature in our humanity, and in our spiritual nature. We are in the process our entire life of growing our souls, and God loves each of us so much that everything in life has the potential for us to grow – even the most painful difficult experiences. God doesn't send these difficulties as some sort of test, but God sends the Holy Spirit to us to help us develop resilience, perseverance, strength of character, humility, compassion for others based in our own experiences, and so on. Our eternal goal is to become more and more like God – to become more and more shaped and formed by true spiritual realities – and to then enjoy God's presence forever. Think about that: we are all so precious to God that God has set up everything in the universe in order for us to grow and advance spiritually in order to experience God directly and finally in person. I want you to know that. I want you to believe that deep in your bones, and your mind, and your soul.

Implications: So, what does this all mean?

- God doesn't punish us or afflict us. You are not being punished by God. God is not an emotionally-battered, bullying parent. God is absolute love, and therefore has nothing but the complete wholes, healing, and full welfare of all creature at heart.

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- You don't need to live up to some impossible standard to receive God's approval. You are already loved, approved, accepted, and freed up to become all that you can be, in this life and continuing into the next.
- Life is one big adventure, and God is your never-failing, ever-present companion through it all. Remember Psalms 23 & 139. Like any adventure, there will be challenges, hardships, and even tragedies. Nonetheless, God's Holy Spirit abides with us in it all, and will teach us how to pass through and persevere.
- This is abundant life my friends: You are loved immensely. You are all precious to God. Don't ever forget this. Now go and love others the way God loves you.