

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

The Best Part About Loving God...

Luke 9: 28-36

2 Corinthians 3: 12-4: 2

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“And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”

Prayer: As your love is sent from you to us, may we reflect back our love to you and each other, that we shine like the sun in your radiance, O God. Amen.

Happy Valentine’s Day...

Most sermons, whether they are preached on Valentine’s Day or not, are about love. Love that comes from God. Love that is received by us. Love that is given by us. A songwriter I once knew wrote a song that had the lyric, “love is perpetual motion—the more that you give it, the more you have to give.” That is one of the profound truths about love. When we love God, others, and ourselves, deeply and unashamedly because God first loved us, we discover that perpetual motion. 1) We discover the reality of God’s love; 2) we discover love’s luminescent qualities—how it can make a person radiant. We discover God’s transformative power of love, a power that can change an ordinary person into a vehicle God uses so that God can move and act in this world giving more love. These are some of the best

parts about loving God.

1) The best part about loving God is that we discover the reality of God's love.

A few years back I remembered an humorous email that explored what we might hear if God had an answering machine:

“Thank you for calling heaven. Please hold. You are 34 million something in the queue. I am sorry; all of our angels and saints are busy helping other sinners right now. However, your prayer is important to us, and we will answer it in the order it was received. Please stay on the line. If you would like to speak to:

God, press 1.

Jesus, press 2.

The Holy Spirit, press 3.

If you would like to hear King David sing a Psalm while you are holding, press 4.

To find a loved one who has been assigned to Heaven, press 5, and then enter his or her social security number followed by the pound sign.

For reservations in heaven, please enter J-O-H-N 3:16

For answers to nagging questions about dinosaurs, the age of the earth, life on other planets, why do the innocent suffer, where Noah's Ark is, and how Moses and Elijah and Jesus were illumined on the mountain, please wait until you arrive.

If you are calling after hours and need emergency assistance, please contact your local pastor” (<http://across.co.nz/IfGodAnsweringMachine.html>, retrieved February 11, 2010).

Don't you just hate it when you get an automated response on the telephone?

Back only twenty years ago, there were telephone operators, a real person you could talk to. Now, almost invariably, whatever business you call, you get “To

speak with so and so, please press 1.” It’s true even with some churches. It’s not true with Chapel Hill, and it’s certainly not true with God.

One of the best parts about loving God is that it’s real. You have a real relationship with God; God is real with you. You can talk to God. You can be face-to-face with God. You can be your total self with God because God sees your total self. You can be vulnerable, open, human. It’s not like Facebook, which is rapidly becoming the standard for what a “friend” is these days. Friendships in the cyber world are not face-to-face, and they are not totally real. Even in the face of philosophy, logic, and science, the best part about loving God is a real relationship based on love.

In his brief 39 years, Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist, made scientific discoveries which are basic to a great amount of our most significant contemporary knowledge. He discovered mathematical theorems which led to the world’s first mechanical calculator and to modern-day calculus. He discovered properties of a vacuum. He described the principle basis for the hydraulic press which physicists now call “Pascal’s Law.” He developed the modern-day theory of probability.

But with all his ability in logic and all his commitment to tough-minded scholarship, Pascal found the greatest assurance in his experiences of faith. On the

evening of Monday, November 23, 1654, he felt the reality of God's presence in Jesus Christ in such intensity that he wrote:

From about half past ten at night to about half an hour after midnight,
FIRE
“God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,” not of philosophers and scholars
Certitude, heartfelt joy, peace.
God of Jesus Christ.
God of Jesus Christ.
The world forgotten, everything except God.
“O righteous Father, the world has not known You, but I have known You” (John
17:25).
Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy. (<http://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/blaise-pascal-accomplishments.htm>, retrieved February 11, 2010).

He copied on parchment the full witness of his experience and sewed it into the lining of his coat, where it was found by his servant after his death nearly eight years later. For Pascal the greatest reality was not what he discovered in laboratory experiments, but what he found in his communion with God, through Jesus Christ (Sermon Resources for February 14, 2010, www.esermons.com, retrieved February 9, 2010). The best part about loving God is that it's real. So love and enjoy God forever.

2) The best part about loving God is that we discover love's luminescent qualities. When we have a real, ongoing relationship with God, the love we have reflects God's glory. This, I think, is what Paul means in this portion of 2 Corinthians—those who have accepted God in Jesus Christ have the veil of ignorance lifted. The disciples saw Jesus in his true colors, his true light, and their

ignorance about who he was lifted, if only for that moment. The veil of misunderstanding is gone. The veil of only believing what culture says or what tradition says or what one can see with the naked eye—that veil is set aside. Culture and tradition both say that heaven is out there, somewhere. The spiritual world is inaccessible until the day you die. That's what we might hear...that's what many believe.

But, Jesus' experience on the mountain negates that thought. Heaven, the spiritual world is right here. It is right now. And when we love, I think we come closer to it. When we love, we take steps to make that spiritual world and the light from it becomes accessible to us.

Think of some of the most loving people you know. Aren't they also the most radiant? Aren't they shining with light? Maybe you see it in their smile. Maybe it's in the way they touch the hand of their spouse, or say loving words. I can think of some of you as examples, but rather than put you on the spot, I think of a former member of Chapel Hill who has now gone on to the spiritual world with God. Remember Earl Mennig? When I knew him, Earl was a kind gentlemen, who seemed to always be smiling. He loved his wife Ruth and took utmost care of her. He spoke softly and kindly. He would sit over there in that section and would sing the words to hymns as Norma played them during Communion as background

music. Earl seemed to have that radiance of love. By his faith in God in Christ, the veil was lifted from him, and he was transformed into the same glory of the Lord, the glory of light and love.

The best part about loving God is that we discover love's luminous qualities, and those luminous qualities are in each of us. When we love, we become more radiant with God's light, and in those moments, the spiritual world is very close.

3) The best part about loving God is that we discover God's transformative power of love. It may have taken the disciples some time, but this experience on the mountain began a transformative process in them that resulted in their ability to share the message of God in Christ to countless other people. Even babbling Peter was able to call upon God to heal a lame man in the post-resurrection days (Acts 3: 1-17). Love is a power that can change an ordinary person into a vehicle God can use. God used Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. God used Peter, James, and John. God used Paul. God used Earl Mennig. God can use every one of us.

In the face of the multiple malaises we have in this world, we can just let our faith in God be a private faith. We can do that. We can decide that we will love only those whom we know. We can do that. We can choose to make our radiant experience with God something related only to our comfort and our own mountaintop experience. We can do that, too.

But if we do that, I can tell you that before too long, we will have wandered away from the best part about loving God—that transformative power of love. A privatized love becomes like sand in the hand; the tighter we hold on to it, the faster it drains from our grasp.

No, I encourage us, rather than being caught in our own private pursuit of comfort, remember that when we have experiences of love and radiant light, we are inextricably linked to the suffering in the world. Biblical commentator N. T. Wright cautions, “The more open we are to God, and to the different dimensions of God’s glory, the more we seem to be open to the pain of the world. We are right to be wary when we return from a great worship service, when we rise from a time of prayer in which God has seemed close and God’s love real and powerful. [Such an experience equips us] so God can use us in this needy world” (<http://i.ucc.org/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.aspx?tabid=81&tabmoduleid=141&articleId=362&moduleId=450&PortalID=0>, retrieved February 9, 2010).

Ah! Maybe this is what Jesus meant when he said, “You are the light of the world... Let your light shine! (Matthew 5: 14-16). Love brings on God’s radiant light. Love transforms us into the same image of Christ’s glory. We love. We forgive. We have mercy. We go for tenderness. We ask for tolerance and are tolerant. We put away grudges. We lift veils. We reconcile with one another. We

console. We visit. We reach out. We love and love again. And again. The best part of loving God is that it's real, it's luminous, it's God's transforming power is at work in us and in the ones we love. It is perpetual motion. Amen.