

What Evidence Do We Show of God's Love?

Friends (long-time and newer), the Love that is God gathers us here this morning – here on land we now know and love as People's Park, recognizing that native people groups and other species have loved it for millennia before us as well.

And the Love that is God gathers us now – now on this third Sunday in the long green, growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of the church year – on a day when we celebrate fathers and other nurturing men in our lives, on the eve of Juneteenth, and on the day when we've baptized Milo.

In the context of here and now, let's wonder together: What evidence do we show of God's Love? I invite us to be open to this question as it relates to both our individual lives and the life of our merging congregation – what evidence do we show of God's Love? Let us pray:

Ever-present, ever powerful Love: be with us this morning as we each wonder about if and how we show evidence of your powerful presence in and through our lives. In every breath we take in and out, grant us serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Two thoughts are prominent in my spirit this morning: **First, I wonder: how is God making love evident through Milo's living** – if we pay close attention, what evidence of God's love can we already perceive through Milo's ways of interacting with the world?

Second, I wonder: how is God making love evident through our living as a merging congregation – if we pay close attention, what evidence of God's love can we already perceive through our new and stretching ways of being together through this time of deep change?

I use the phrase, 'if we pay close attention' in a purposeful way this morning. I believe that paying close attention is foundational to sharing love with one another as we accompany each other along the journey. Loving each other and loving ourselves sometimes goes smoothly and sometimes goes messily (filled with uncomfortable fits and starts). But the Love that is God empowers every attempt we make to care for one another and ourselves.

The sacrament of Holy Baptism seems to serve as a striking reminder to pay attention to one another. Within the Christian faith, there are a variety of understandings about the meanings and power of sacraments. In our congregation, we recognize two sacraments – Baptism and Holy Communion. They are both participatory experiences – rites through which we **feel** God's powerful, palpable loving presence within each of us and connecting us together.

Let's stay open to trusting that more evidence will unfold – both in Milo's life and in our shared life as this merging congregation. To the extent that he and we remain open to serving as channels of God's Love, it will happen.

Let's turn to our scripture readings for today to see what new lessons we might learn (or what old lessons we might review) about God making love known through human life.

While there are scripture passages in which Abraham behaves in ethically questionable ways, our passage for this morning seems to glimmer with the best of this larger-than-life mythical character. Isn't it true of all of us? Our behavior (our decision-making, our responses to others, etc.) can often be messy, but there are best traits in each of us, which can be experienced by others if they invite the best of us to shine.

Let's linger a moment on the role of this character who is often referred to as 'Father Abraham.' Islam, Judaism and Christianity all includes stories of Abraham in our sacred scriptures and are known as the Abrahamic faith traditions. The story of Abraham occupies substantial space in the book of Genesis and has had impact in shaping the Christian story. Not unlike Abraham, father figures in our own lives have demonstrated flaws, mis stepped, and caused hurt during their lifetimes.

Whether the men who come to mind for you today are living or deceased, I hope that you find opportunity both to express gratitude for the best ways they have affected you and (where possible to do so with self-love and self-respect) to forgive the hurt their behavior has caused for you – such that you find some measure of freedom in releasing and letting go of the hurtful times.

In today's story, Abraham was available and aware as the travelers passed near his tent. Ah! This was essential! Many of us (me included) would benefit from experimenting with a slowed pace and single tasking. In seeing the travelers, Abraham was moved to compassion and a desire to provide respite for the travelers. How apropos it is as we look toward World Refugee Day in the coming week. We heard,

"If I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass by our tent. Let some water be brought, that you may bathe your feet, and then rest yourselves beneath this tree. As you have come to your faithful one, let me bring you a little food, that you may refresh yourselves."

I wonder: could you exponentially increase your chances of impacting others through acts of kindness if you start from a place of paying attention to the needs someone might reveal?

Now let's examine what evidence the traveler shows of God's love. From among the traveling companions, one speaks aloud in the story.

He, too, pays attention to his surroundings. Intuiting something about this hospitable family, he articulates a possibility that most anyone would find foolish. We heard,

“Where is Sarah?’ they asked.

‘There in the tent,’ Abraham replied.

One of them said, ‘I will surely return to you this time next year, and Sarah will then have a child.’”

This traveler could identify goodness and new life where others were not able to do so. **I wonder: Who in your life bravely offers big ideas that could usher in new possibilities? God is a God of resurrection and renewal of life. We need to affirm those people who show evidence of God’s life-affirming love through their openness to imaginatively thinking big.**

Let’s also look to Sarah, whose honesty and laughter cut to the chase. **I wonder: do you have a friend or family member who responds to others with candor?** We heard,

“So Sarah laughed to herself and said, ‘Now that I am so old and my husband even older, is pleasure to come my way again?’”

When we are confronted with new information or an opinion that seems wrong, we might close up in defensiveness, subconsciously assuming we can protect ourselves from the invitation to expand our thinking. Not Sarah! She engages directly and in good humor with the traveler’s bizarre prediction. May her example encourage us to lean into candor when we encounter new ideas. That is one of many ways we can stay open to Love working through us.

Finally, let's sit for a moment with words from today's epistle reading. Paul was writing to the members of a church he had helped plant in Rome. He was writing from prison, having been incarcerated for preaching and teaching the way of Jesus. I drew our question for today (What Evidence Do We Show of God's Love?) from this passage:

"...but the proof of God's love is that Christ died for us even while we were sinners." For Paul, Jesus' death was proof or evidence of a loving God active in the world. Jesus' capacity to speak love from the cross (the instrument of execution) and the power of his example to affect lives long beyond his own lifetime are evidence Jesus has shown of a loving God being powerfully present within human communities.

There are many things to love about the Apostle Paul's articulations of faith and there are many of his tirades about how he thought the early churches should run their communal lives that merit pushback from our vantage point in this land and in this twenty-first century.

What I love about today's passage is the honesty with which Paul notes that there will be bumps in the road as we journey in faith and the gameness with which he encourages us to hope anyway. Finally, we heard,

"...we even rejoice in our afflictions! We know that affliction produces perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and character, hope. And such a hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

Friends in Christ, may we hold ourselves open to the work of the Holy Spirit pouring God's love into our hearts and transmitting it in evident ways through our lives to be shared with others.

With Abraham, may we pay attention and identify ways to serve others.

With the traveler, may we boldly articulate what we can imagine.

With Sarah, may we bravely respond to life with candor and good humor when we can muster them.

And with the Apostle Paul, may we seek after hope – even in the midst of afflictions. Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
June 18, 2023 (3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Father's Day, Baptism of Milo Holler)
Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-6; Romans 5:1-8