

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Matthew 25: Visiting the Prisoner
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
September 8, 2019

Genesis 1:26-31; 1 John 4:7-12

They were back. Regardless of all the time and money my parents put into their home, they were back. The “they” that were back were cracks in the walls and gaps between the walls and the ceiling. They were there because in Houston, homes are built “slab on grade”, meaning that the land is graded, rebar is laid and concrete poured, much like people do with driveways here in Michigan. The problem in Houston is that the soil is like a sponge. When it gets wet it expands and when it dries up it contracts. In addition, the soil does not rise and fall evenly, so that over the years, the soil under foundations is shifting at different rates, thus twisting and turning the foundation in different directions. Twice my parents had holes drilled in the foundation and piers and jacks put under the house to stabilize it. Both times it failed. So, when my father finally sold his house two years ago, the cracks were still there. I have to say this image has become my perfect metaphor for life. If we don’t have good foundations, cracks are going to appear. It doesn’t matter what part of life we are talking about; relationships, businesses, educational institutions, if they do not have a firm foundation on which to exist, cracks will appear and regardless of our best efforts to fix them, they may crack and fail.

The same is true for our faith; that if our faith does not have a firm foundation on which to stand, it too will crack and perhaps fail. I say this because just like my parent’s foundation was continually stressed, so is our faith. Our faith is twisted and turned by stressful moments in our lives; stressful moments when we deal with difficult relationships and jobs; with vacillating health and illness; with painful layoffs and interviews; with stresses in society of war, recession, politics and uncertainty. Any or all of these can call into question what we believe or why we believe it. It can even cause us to lose our faith, as with one pastor I knew who quit believing in God because of the horrific tragedies that encompassed the world. The question before us then, is what sort of a foundation do we have that will ensure our faith can weather the ever-occurring stresses that life brings? The answer can be found in scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, and that answer is, that God loves the world. Yes, the foundation that will support us in all times, if we allow it to do so, is to personally see and experience God’s love for the world and for us. I realize that in the face of what we have witnessed over the past several weeks, shootings, hurricanes, and the like, it might be hard to speak about God loving the world, but if you will walk with me, I hope you will see this that this foundation is present around us and in us.

How do we know God loves us? We know because God has given us this creation. The writer of Genesis makes it clear that this creation is a gift of God intended to supply the needs of every living thing. It is good, meaning that it serves the purpose of bringing forth and sustaining life in all its fullness; in all its richness and diversity. This planet provides us with air to breath and water to drink. It provides us with soil to till and minerals to extract. It provides us with seeds to be sewn and rain to nourish them. This year we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the moon landings. And while that was an amazing feat, what amazed me as much were the pictures of the earth, this blue-green ball floating in a sea of darkness; a globe teeming with life in the midst of a seemingly endless field of stars and galaxies. We can make God’s love a foundation for our lives when we realize just how miraculous is this creation on which we live. Want to see God’s love...look at the beauty of creation.

How do we know God loves us? We know God loves us because God has given us community. The Genesis’ writer offers us a theological account of the creation of the physical world whose penultimate act is the creation of human beings. The writer states that we are created male and female, and in God’s image. This description is not about who we are to marry or about sexual orientation, it is about community, that we are not

made to exist alone. It is a reminder that God did not make isolated individuals who were to live apart from others, but that God created us to be in intimate communion with one another. And one of the great gifts of God according to the Bible is that God did not just create one kind of people who looked and spoke and acted alike. Instead scripture tells us that God created the nations, or in Greek the *ethne*...from which we get the words ethnic and ethnicities. What this means is that God created us in a wide variety of skin colors, languages, sexual orientations and cultures. And these nations, God's children, are intended to be a tapestry that is as vibrant as the tapestry of the physical world around us. This vibrant diversity of humanity is what enriches the world. Want to see God's love, look at the people around you.

How do we know that God loves us? We know that God loves us because God has given us couches. What I mean by that is that God has given us rest. Had we continued reading this passage we would have heard the story of the final day of creation, when God rested. The scriptures read that *"on the seventh day God finished God's creation and rested."* Chances are God was not worn out or tired. Instead God was making clear in the beginning that rest, time away from work, time to enjoy the company of community, time to enjoy this amazing creation, time to give thanks to God, is a gift that we are supposed to take advantage of and enjoy. What that means is that God wants us to take some time and appreciate all that we have been given. God wants us to take some time and experience the love that God offers. God's love for us is so great that God does not want us to work ourselves to death, but instead to rest and recharge, or to use Biblical language, God wants us to enjoy a sabbath. Want to see God's love, take a nap and relax.

How do we know God loves us? We know because we can love others. We know because the love we give to others is the love God has given to us. And for us as Jesus' followers, we trust that the love we have comes through Christ. John 1 puts it this way, *"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love...In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."* In other words, we know God loves us because we are capable of loving others. In college I was a business major and though I don't remember much of what I learned I remember two things. First there is LIFO (last in first out) and FIFO (first in first out). This morning I want to give you another four-letter concept, LILO. This is love in, love out. We believe that we are capable of loving others because God loved us; because God has poured God's love into us. And this means that not only can we love those who love us, but we can love those who are difficult to love. We can do this because this is what God does. God does not just love people who look like us, think like us, speak like us. God loves the world and everyone in it. We can also do this because Jesus told us we can. Jesus speaks about this when he says, *"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them...but love your enemies, do good, and lend expecting nothing in return."* (Luke 6:32, 35) LILO means that we have been given enough love to love God, neighbor and stranger.

Our faith has been given a firm foundation in God's love for the world. My challenge to you then is to take out your sticky note and write two things on it. First, I want you to consider which of the ways of experiencing God's love, creation, community or couch, is most meaningful to you and then write it down. Second, I want you to write down the name of a person, or perhaps a group of people that you would not normally love, or find hard to love, it can be their initials, on the sticky note as well. We will give you some time to do this. Then I want you to take these notes home and place them somewhere where you will see them every day. Then as you read them, first give thanks for God's love that comes to you. But also, to ask yourselves, how can I work to love this person.