

*Sermon September 3 and 4, 2011; 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost; The Rev. Jan O'Neil; St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, Creve Coeur, MO; Revised Common Lectionary: Exodus 12: 1-14; Psalm 119: 33-40; Romans 13: 8-14; Matthew 18: 15-20*

God is love! God is powerful. God does not control us because God loves us and love is more powerful and liberating than anything in the universe. Yes, this power of God's love is God's grace that is transforming, healing, and to be shared. Great theology, but what does "God is love" really mean for our lives? This may be the most complex subject imbedded in our scriptures. Words fall short. Theological statements fall short. We toggle back and forth from such all-encompassing general statements about God to the specifics of a given story framed in details like today, in a context that is sometimes puzzling. We ask, "Where is God in **this** story? We receive accounts that give us snippets of God and Jesus in the world, in the midst of real lives often with very specific rules for a specific situation.

In Exodus we hear of the ritual details of preparing for the Passover, what to wear; how to share, prepare, and eat the lamb; how to be ready to leave quickly when freedom comes: in the big picture we learn of our radical dependence on a liberating God.

In Romans we are told what **not** to do—four specific commandments stating don't covet, don't steal, don't murder, don't commit adultery: in the broader picture we are directed simply to "love our neighbors as ourselves."

In Matthew's gospel we learn that God and Jesus are relational: "When two or three are gathered together in my name I am there among them." God loves us so we can love others and form healthy communities. In this gospel Jesus "gets" relationships! I'd hate to be competing with him in the current job market for a job as a high school counselor—or any counselor that helps others with relationships-- Jesus would be hired in a minute! He has all the skills and credentials. In this gospel today Jesus is as practical as can be. He knows that the sure way to stir up a hornet's nest in any community—a church, a family, a group of friends-- is for one to go running to tell a third person if someone has offended you. Jesus says instead, point out that fault when the two of you are alone, talk it over...listen to each other...check it out one-on-one so the other person is not humiliated or defensive. I think Jesus would make a great high school

counselor, especially for ninth graders, especially for girls. I know I am generalizing here, girls, but hopefully to make a point. I can't tell you how many times Lisa, or Tamika, or Samantha, would come into my counseling office in tears, saying "Jessie said this or that; Jessie said I was texting Jason, that I have no right to do that, hands off; Jason is her boyfriend. She called me a \_\_\_\_\_. Instead of talking directly to Jessie, Lisa is telling me, her counselor, and half the freshman class for that matter, what Jessie has done to offend her.

It is so tempting isn't it, for all of us to tell someone else rather than talking directly to the person who has offended us? Do it in private first so the other person can hear. Not just in schools, but in families, in marriage. Talk first directly to the family member who may have hurt you. And remember churches can be like families. I'm guessing for those of you in AA or AlAnon this gospel sounded like a good intervention strategy. Love with boundaries...a part of good relationship building. Jesus was good at this because being in relationship is a two way street and God is all about relationships. The Gospel is rooted in love supporting respectful relationships and also makes it clear that an intervention may be necessary if both parties aren't living in respectful love. And, remember that Jesus never stops ministering to those who have erred: this isn't a kick-you-out- forever kind of program.

So in the three lessons today we have three stories, three sets of rules that instruct us: we are dependent on God; we are to love our neighbors as ourselves and as God loves us; and God is with us in community. God's love is powerful, God is relational. God's love facilitates community. Based on experiences I've had in the past week, I'd like to add the word lavish: God's love is lavish.

A week ago five of us from St. Timothy's joined with about 100 others from our diocese and were privileged to attend this year's Making Disciples Workshop at our cathedral. Becca Stevens, an Episcopal priest from Nashville, was the morning guest speaker. Becca is the chaplain at Vanderbilt University and the founder of Magdalene House/Thistle Farms, which together form an amazingly rich ministry to young women who many consider the most outcast/forgotten/marginalized people, now and in Jesus' time: prostitutes; drug addicted; those just released from prison. Becca brought two of her graduates from the two- year healing

program from Magdalene House; Sheila and Katrina's stories were accounts of courage, hope, amazing healing **and** productive lives retrieved. You'll be hearing more about Becca's program, because there are seeds planted to consider an outgrowth of this ministry in St. Louis. We may have the chance to perpetuate this lavish love in a specific way.

But today, I want to focus on the words Becca used to characterize the power of this rehabilitation program that is economical and radical—rooted in the Gospel, self supporting, and based on lavish love. It is the very lavishness of God's love that transforms us, frees us, and then can flow through us as we love others, empowered by God's love that helps us do God's work in the world. God's love is generous, unprecedented, so much more that we could imagine. Becca reminded us we are not called to change the world, but to love it.

Becca's words give power to a personal encounter I recently experienced and witnessed in my job as chaplain at a large city hospital. It is not an easy story to hear or to tell: it encompasses grief. Please bear with me as I share my viewing of outpouring of generous, lavish love—more that I could ever imagine.

At the beginning of my shift, I was asked to be prepared to be with a young mother (and her mother) for the birth of her full-term baby who had just died in utero from multiple developmental issues; the mom "Julie" was requesting that I baptize her baby immediately after the birth. In God's presence "Julie" and I talked at length before her labor intensified. She was as prepared as a mother could possibly be to grieve and to cherish at the same time. She had an outfit for her baby's baptism and we had a plan. At her side during her hard labor, I first experienced the lavishing of love by the doctor and nurses who assisted "Julie" with the birth; they were truly midwives working in holy ways to bring this child into the world to be claimed and named. "Julie" labored hard—the nurses & doctors and the grandma were relentless in their encouragement. It was truly a labor of love in community; the delivered-baby was placed on "Julie's" breast; she cradled her baby and called him by name, over and over.

Was it time for me to baptize? Not yet. Given sacred time, "Julie" and her mom bathed "Levi"—the water in the bathing-basin was holy water just by the nature of this very holy act in

community. They bathed every crease, touched every finger, each toe, both armpits, gently, gently, with lavish love and grief.

This is my image of God lavishly loving this world-- you, me, every finger, every toe; loving us in our imperfect fleshy bodies; grieving our losses and struggles; weeping and loving all at once with each of us as a created babe.

In the hospital birthing room the official baptism followed, but my memory of this baptism is not of my part, but rather the washing, the caressing, by the loving mother and grandmother that overpowered the grief of loss while calling “Levi” by name.

This is the God I know-- offering to wrap us in the armor of light to be baptized dressed in the Lord Jesus Christ (in Paul’s words)--.a God that does not control, but calls us by name; is always with us in our joys, losses and grief; and loves us lavishly.

This God of our scriptures graces us lavishly and comes back to us over and over again hoping we can “get” what this radical love is all about—offering grace yet freedom of response. Being loved so fully and touched so gently by God empowers us to love others, to reach out to others in sacrificial love.

This God of ours that loves us so generously knows us as a swaddled babe. When we, and every hair on our head, are loved by God, we are empowered to give this love to others. This love, this grace received, transformed and shared invites us in turn to love God’s world lavishly. There is no list of rules, 1- 10. We cannot change the whole world; we can only embrace it fully, piece by piece, with God’s love flowing through us to Joplin, Kiva borrowers, Sudanese mothers, our neighbors in the city of St. Louis, St. Louis County, all of God’s people, on and on. This is love, this is grace received, transformed, and shared—the greatest power for healing in this world.