

Why Do You Love Me?
A Sermon By Rev. Jessica C. Gregory
Matthew 4: 1-11
January 20, 2019

At 10 a.m. on Tuesday morning, 10 of us gathered in the Sun Room at Westminster Place to do what we do every Tuesday morning, study the Bible. In addition to discussing this morning's scripture passage, we also talked about baptism. During this conversation, long-time Northminster member and accomplished genealogist Fran Kinney shared her baptism story, along with the words printed on her grandfather's baptismal certificate from March 10, 1867:

*I am baptized, through my christening, I am bound to God.
 Therefore, I speak with happiness in sorrow, anxiety and need.
 I am baptized, it brings me happiness which will stay with me forever.
 I am baptized in Thy name, God. Father, Son and Holy Ghost.
 I am counted among thy seeds and among thy people who are called holy.
 Oh, what joy will come to me! Lord, make me worthy.*

In the year 30, when Jesus was baptized, and in the year 1867, when Fran's grandfather was baptized, and in the year 1927 when Fran was baptized, and at our own baptisms, past or yet to come, the truth remains the same: in our baptisms we take on our identity of Christian; we are bound to God forever. We belong to God forever. We are God's people forever. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, in the act of cleansing water washing or sprinkling over us, we are claimed by God. No longer living on our own, moving through life alone, compelled to follow society's lead of money, power, and success, greed, isolation and fear. We are the Lord's, free to live unafraid, grateful for enough, not consumed with wanting or needing more than enough. Claimed by God, filled with happiness, we respond in faith, living intentionally as God's people.

At its core, this is the transformation our baptism makes possible, but not probable. If you are like me, your joy at being a baptized child of God is coupled with concern. As easy as it is for us to allow the Spirit to wash over us, it is challenging to live out our new lives. The closing line on Fran's grandfather's baptism certificate sums this tension: Oh, what joy will come to me! Lord, make me worthy.

Living a life of faith is anything but easy.

Last week, we celebrated the baptism of Jesus. We remembered our own baptisms and received anew God's grace and love. This week, we hear the story of Jesus being tempted. The son with whom God is well pleased is the same son whose faith is being tested. After 40 days and nights in the wilderness, where he was led by the Spirit, Jesus is exhausted and famished.

Living a life of faith has never been easy.

Moses spent 40 days and nights up on Mt. Sinai with God before receiving the 10 commandments; Elijah fasted 40 days and nights on Mt. Horeb before hearing the word of God. And the Israelites lived in the wilderness 40 years to test the character of their hearts.

In each instance, after the time had passed, the person, or people, experienced God in a different way. So did Jesus. As he is tempted by the devil to demonstrate God's power, Jesus experiences the challenge and discipline necessary to live faithful to God. When it comes to tempting someone, the devil is the one to do it. Wanting Jesus to prove his divinity, and knowing he is famished, the devil asks him to turn stones to bread. I imagine that Jesus' mouth watered at the very utterance of the word bread, his stomach rumbling all the while.

And yet, Jesus refuses to comply: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." The devil tries again, and Jesus refuses, again quoting from the law book of the Hebrew Scriptures, Deuteronomy: "It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (6:16). The Devil tries a final time, after which Jesus commands: "Away with you Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" (Deut 6:13).

The Israelites were tempted in the wilderness in much the same way as Jesus is tempted by the devil here. Jesus does not make the same mistakes the Israelites did. There is no golden calf in this story. Both God and human, Jesus has divine discipline, obedience and strength to keep his human needs from breaking his trust in God. He cites the lessons learned by the Israelites in their wilderness trials as his rebukes to the devil. The intentional parallels between the Israelite's wilderness experience and Jesus's own makes clear Jesus' deep faithfulness and his identity as God's son. Even in the most vulnerable situation, Jesus refuses to compromise who he is, whose he is. It wasn't easy. In his divinity, Jesus passed the test. In his humanness, Jesus was famished, and it was difficult. Living a life of faith is not easy.

We can all recall times when our faith has been tested through our own hardship or a loved one's. It was a difficult time. As our faith falters, our need to know God is there; our need to see God working becomes great. We hear the scripture: "Do not put your Lord to your God to the test." We sit and wonder, why not? Maybe it's time for God to pass a test, so we know God is really there.

These days it is hard to tell. On Wednesday, 21 people were killed in a terrorist attack at a hotel in Nairobi; 16 were killed in an ISIS suicide bombing. Friday evening a gas explosion in central Mexico killed at least 73; here at home, the government shutdown is in its 30th day. About 420,000 essential federal workers, roughly the size of Miami, Florida, are working without pay. An additional 380,000 workers are living without pay, which amounts to most of the city of New Orleans, not getting a paycheck. Rent checks are coming due; pay days come and go without any money. Millions of American families are hurting. Our faith would be made stronger if God would answer those prayers for this to end and for people to get paid for their labor. Except that our faith is not in what God does for us, but in God. Period.

Why do you love me? God could ask us. Is it because you have been given health and family and friends and work and success? One commentator poses the question like this: "Do people love the kingdom of heaven itself or the prosperity, protection and power it provides them?" (Beach-Verhey 2010 52). Please know that I don't ask this question thinking the answer is an easy one. It is not. It can be incredibly difficult to celebrate the

gifts and blessings of God without turning those things into what you are actually worshipping. Especially today, when society worships all sorts of idols – from cars and homes to jobs and even family. What might it look like to have the happiness of God in times of sorrow and sadness?

Horatio Spafford offers us one model. Born in 1828, Horatio was a Chicago businessman as well as an active Presbyterian Church member. In 1871 the fortune Horatio accumulated went up in flames, literally, in the Great Chicago Fire, which occurred just after his son died. Discouraged by the ashes and endings that had filled their world, the Spafford family decided to get away and planned a European trip. At the last minute, Horatio had to work and couldn't travel with his wife and four daughters. He sent them on their way, aboard the S.S. Ville du Havre. Shortly after it began its journey, the S.S. Ville du Havre was struck by an English ship. It sank, along with many aboard, in 12 minutes. Horatio heard from his wife when she was safely in Wales. The message consisted of two words: "Saved alone."

Upon hearing the tragic news, Horatio immediately traveled to be with his wife. It was during this sea venture, as he approached the area of ocean thought to be where the ship carrying his daughters sank, that Horatio is said to have written these words: "When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul."

It is well with my soul, Horatio Spafford wrote after the death of five children, four at once. How? How could his soul be well even as his heart was broken? By believing in God, in spite of it all: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38)."

If truly nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus, then it is *always* well with our souls, regardless of chaos, destruction, and even death that might swirl amid our lives. Living a life of faith is not easy. While few of us will endure death and sorrow to the extent of Horatio Spafford and his wife, many of us may be caught up in swirls of sorrow, uncertainty, anger, sadness, fear, loneliness, stress, depression, debt. The list is endless. The good news is that God's love for us is endless too.

But this truth does us little good if we don't trust it. When we don't trust, we are held captive to the despair around us and we are not well – not our souls, not our hearts, not our lives. Life becomes hard, overwhelming, superficial. We have to let the joy come to us. While we might forget about our Christian identity from time to time, God never forgets us. Never. And that is worth all the love in the world, regardless of anything the world might bring. Why do you love Me? God could ask us. Because you are our God, in whom we belong in life and in death. What joy is ours! Lord, make us worthy. Amen.

Work Cited

Timothy A. Beach-Verhey. 2010. "Matthew 4:1-11: Theological Perspective" in *Feasting on the Gospels Matthew Volume 1*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. pp. 50, 52, 54.