

Fulfilling Promises

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Psalm 36:5-10

“Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.”

MAIN IDEA – We are all loved by God no matter what

THEOLOGICAL IDEA – steadfast love

Movement 1 – Whom do you Love?

Are there people whom you love?

Words – selective, choosy, vulnerable, obvious

Example – your children; your spouse; your family; friends; sports teams; articles of clothing; toys

Illustration – the idea of love for Scarlet in *Gone with the Wind*;

Image – like schoolyard children we name our loves

Witness – “Love is a choice you make from moment to moment.” – Barbara De Angelis (Writer and speaker)

Movement 2 – Whom don’t you Love?

Are there people you don’t love?

Words – despise; annoyed; against

Example – people who chew gum with a loud popping noise; people who cut ahead in traffic; convicted killers; other sports teams;

Illustration –

Image – oil and water

Witness – “It is easy to hate and it is difficult to love. This is how the whole scheme of things works. All good things are difficult to achieve; and bad things are very easy to get.” – Rene Descartes

Movement 3 – Whom Does and Doesn’t God Love?

What about God?

Words – worldly expectation; human projection

Example – when we expect God to not love the people we don’t love, and love the people we love; when we let God love people so we don’t have to; when we start to wonder if God could love us as well

Illustration – Hitler, Hussien, other notorious individual; ourselves; Detective Cane in CSI

Image – God’s love becomes a mirror

Witness – Fauerbach – God is a projection of our ideas

Movement 4 – Steadfast Love of God

What if God loves everyone?

Words – unconditional; hopeful; promise; covenant

Example – when we are promised to be loved; God’s love in all places; the parent that loves all of her children; the universal aspect of God’s love

Illustration – the imagery of the psalm;

Image – a roof and a floor surrounding us

Witness -

Movement 5 – The Grace in the Steadfast Love

How would we live into this love?

Words – grace, forgiveness, hope, peace

Example – when we realize that we are forgiven; when we embrace the steadfast love, and enter into the relationship; when we live out that relationship; the more we live in the way God calls us to live the greater our experience of God’s love; when God hates the bad things which we love

Illustration – someone who is nice to you because you are nice back; or maybe move Caulfield up here; cracked pot

Image – like a rain washing us all

Witness – Houlden Caulfield – Catcher in the Rye

Movement 6 – The Sharing God’s Love

How would we share God’s love?

Words – sharing; offering hope;

Example – trying to love the person you are taught to hate; sharing this hope with the person who has none

Illustration – King and the firebombing of his house

Image – we try to share the story of love

Witness -

Movement 1 – Whom do you Love?

Are there people whom you love? I would love to ask that question of Scarlett in the movie or book, *Gone With the Wind*. She has many interested men, she has more than one husband, she loves Ashley, she love Rhett, she loves her land, and during the movie I just get confused with who she loves. I want to ask her, to try to find out from her who it is that she really loves. She seems so conflicted, so torn and I wonder who it is that she really loves.

Whom do you love? Are there people in your life that you adore, that you enjoy, that you like, or that you love? Are there people whom you love? This seems to be an easy question, but humor me. Think about the people in your life you love. Let's list the usual suspects, your family, your friends, your children, and your spouse. But I wonder who, or what else, do you love. Is there a sports team? Are there articles of clothing? Are there types of food? Do you love to shop, do you love to clean, do you love to garden, or watch T.V. Is there a place where you love, or a time of day that you love? Who, or what do you love?

On one level, it is easy to think about love. Love is a word we use easily, we use in a flippant way. Like schoolyard children, it is easy to gather on the playground and name our loves. It is easy to talk about the movies we love, the cars we love, or any other material thing that invokes excitement in our life. Yet we also understand, we know about this idea of love we have for others. We know about love for our family. We know about love between friends. This is a relational love, a love that takes more time than a trip to the store, or sitting in front of the television. This is a love we work at, and a love we grow into. This is a love that we experience, that we share and we live. The writer and speaker Barbara DeAngelis once said, "Love is a choice you make from moment to moment." You make choices to continue to love, to continue to stay into your relationships. This is the love I want you to think about. This is the love I want you to embrace. Whom do you love?

Movement 2 – Whom don't you Love?

Are there people you don't love? Are there things you don't love? Are there people who rub you the wrong way, individuals who grate against you, or annoy you? Are there people you don't love?

Are their things you don't love? Do traffic jams bother you? Or do phone calls during the suppertime or sales persons or annoying commercials rise your ire? Do you hate a sports team or people popping their gum, a specific item of clothing or a type of food? Are there things that you just don't love, are their things that you hate?

What about people? I'm not asking if there are people that you hate, but are their people that you have a difficult time loving? People who start traffic jams, people who call during the suppertime, or people who write the annoying commercials all rub you the wrong way. Are there people who you just can't find yourself liking? Are their people that you just can't love? I'm asking you to try to be honest with yourself. Ask yourself that hard, that difficult question. What about convicted killers? What about child molesters? What about tyrants of other countries? Can you see yourself loving them? Are their people whom you just don't love?

It reminds me of the movie *American History X*. In this movie the main character is brought up by a racist father. His father is not a bad person, but is someone who has a difficult time loving people who are black or Hispanic or different in any other surface way. And he passes this inability to love and respect people of a different color, people of a different race to his son. He son ends up taking this lack of love to another step and another level. The father couldn't love a certain kind of people. The son couldn't love a certain kind of people.

This is a difficult question to ask of ourselves. It is not something that we would like to admit, but then again who could love a convicted killer, who could love the child molester? It feels like mixing oil and water, to share love with such people. Lets be honest, there are people we just don't like. There are things we just don't

like. The philosopher, Rene Descartes said, “It is easy to hate and it is difficult to love,” and we often fall into the realm of hate. There are individuals we love, but there are also individuals whom we don’t love, whether they deserve it or not.

Movement 3 – Whom Does and Doesn’t God Love?

What about God? What about God’s love? What about that which God does not love. Do you think that maybe God loves that which we love? I’m not talking about the surface things. I’m not talking about the clothes and the food and the sports teams. I’m talking about our family, our friends. I’m talking about our spouses and our children. I’m talking about the members of our church community, the members of our home community. Do you think that God loves them?

It makes sense, it feels right to imagine that God would love the same things we love. It feels right to consider, and to assume that God would find favor on those very things we find favor. We love our friends, our family and we can’t imagine a God not loving as well.

Yet what is it that God does not love? What is it that kindles God’s temper and raises God’s ire? Can we imagine the things that fall outside of God’s graces? Would God also be annoyed at traffic jams, at garish clothing, at certain sports teams? Most likely not. Does God favor certain foods over others? Probably not. It feels likely that God’s love or lack of love is not focused around things, teams, food, or clothing. It feels like God would be silent about those things.

Yet what about people? Can we imagine that God might not love certain individuals? Can we imagine that certain people have fallen outside of God’s grace and God’s glory? Think of the villains of the world. Think of those individuals who are responsible for the deaths of many, can God love those individuals? Let’s just ask the obvious question, does God love Hitler? Does God love Sadam Hussein? Does God love Bin Laden? Does God love these notorious individuals who we find it difficult to love ourselves? What do you think? Do you find it difficult to imagine God loving these people? Maybe you say to yourself, Lord, I cannot imagine loving individuals who are responsible for such heinous acts. I cannot find a place in my heart for such people. Maybe you think this and then imagine that it would be impossible for God as well.

Then think about the convicted murders in our country. Think about those who have been convicted for killing innocent men, women and children. Do you think there is a place in God’s heart for those who have taken the lives of others? Do you think there is room in God’s heart for such heinous sinners?

Think of those who have caused people pain. Corporate leaders who “cooked the books” so thousands of employees lost their retirement. Does God love those people? Think of those who have lied and manipulated political power and neglected the people. Does God love those people? Think of the thieves, think of the manipulators, and think of the ones who have not show a love for others. Can God love them?

What about individuals from other countries. What about individual from other religions. Does God love them?

Do you see what we’ve done? We have moved down the ladder of severity in crimes, we have considered individuals whom we can’t imagine loving, and maybe you have found it difficult to imagine God loving as well. The Medieval mystic Theresa of Avila had visions of heaven and hell and wrote down her visions. In one of her writings, Theresa went to heaven and saw the very people she could not love – Lutherans.

Here is what I am wondering. Do we project our ideas of love upon God? Do we cast our ideas, our boundaries of insiders and outsiders towards God, thinking that it seems far from any possibility to imagine God loving those whom we cannot love? There was a philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach who described God as a projection of our own desires. God was like a silver screen, blank and waiting for our own ideas. We desire a loving parent, and God is a loving parent. We desire justice and God is a God of justice. We find ourselves

having a difficult time loving a certain person, a group, an action and God also does not love that group, that action, or that person. Do we project our ideas upon God?

Think about this in your personal life. Maybe there is a part of you that you are not proud of. Maybe you have done something in the past that you regret. Maybe you are involved in something now that gives you shame. Does God love that part of you? Does God love the darkness in your life? In the television show *CSI: Miami*, the lead character feels responsible for an action he undertook when he was a detective in New York City. He killed an innocent person in the line of duty and feels guilty. In the beginning of one episode, Detective Cane is in a confession booth and asks the priest if he is yet forgiven. The priest asks if he feels forgiven, and Cane says no, and leaves to continue his acts of penance. Cane cannot fully love himself, and will not let God fully love him either.

Who does God love and whom doesn't God love? What are the lines, what are the boundaries for those who can receive the grace and the love of God. There are individuals we love. Does God love them as well? There are people we cannot love. Are they outside of God's grace as well? When thinking about love, what about God? What about the love of the divine? What about God.

Movement 4 – Steadfast Love of God

What if God loves everyone? What if God's love is for everyone? Look at the imagery of the psalm. Listen to the words of the psalm. God's love extends to the heavens. All people take refuge in the shadow in God's wings through God's steadfast love. God's love is in the highest places, and God's presence is to the deep. The psalm gives us this wonderful imagery of mountains and of the ocean, and everything in-between is where God can be found and experienced. We are surrounded by God's love. It is the roof over our heads and the floor beneath our feet. We are surrounded by God's love. It is in the light and the shadows of the light. It is like a rain washing down upon us, constantly dousing us, and keeping us soaked with love and grace.

When I read this psalm I think of Holden Caulfield in the book *Catcher in the Rye*. It reminds me of the moment near the end of the book when it begins to rain, and Holden feels cleansed. The rain washed down upon him, it cleanses him and gives him hope. The psalm suggests the same for the love of God. It is everywhere, washing down upon us, cleaning us, and giving us hope.

Yet it is not just the love of God that we are experiencing, but the *steadfast love* of God that we receive. This is love that is based on a promise. This is love that comes out of a relationship. This is a covenantal love that we all receive. God loves us, God promises to love us, no matter where we are, and no matter where we are. Like a mother hen bringing her chicks under her wings, God calls us again and again to return to that holy, that divine love emanating from God. Imagine this, understand this, and soak this in. God has promised to love us. God has promised to be in relationship with us. God has promised to let us drink from the fountain of life, to see the light of the Lord. No matter where we are physically. No matter where we are spiritually. No matter where we are in our life, God's love washed down upon us, calling us to the divine and the holy. Can you imagine this? What if, what if God loves everyone?

Movement 5 – The Grace in the Steadfast Love

How would we live into this love? How do we allow this love to change us, transform us and make us whole? How do we live into this love?

This is an important question to ask, because you may be thinking, "pastor, are you saying that I can live my life in any way that I choose, and I will still be loved by God? Are you saying that those people who have taken lives, who have committed horrible atrocities are still loved by God?" This is a question that nags at us,

that plagues our thoughts. This is a question that will always be in the back of the mind when you see that person, that group, which you cannot love. “Even him, Lord?”

God’s steadfast love is always available to everyone, but it is a relational love. It is a love that we receive and that we give back. It is not a love that we just passively receive, but a love that we actively live into. It is not a love that just washes all people in a blanket, but that covers all people and calls them all to live into a relationship with God. It is a love that calls you to follow the lead of God that calls you to live into the life that God desires for you to love. There is still justice. There is still righteousness. We are still to be held responsible for the life we live, but we will not be cast out of God’s favor because of our life.

I recently received an e-mail that was moving around. It was about a woman in China who had two clay pots that she used to carry water. One of the pots was cracked. Every day she would walk to the water, fill both of the pots, and then carry them back to her home. Every day the cracked pot would lose water along the way and end up being only half full by the time the woman returned home. Finally, one day, the woman’s son asked her why she still held onto this cracked pot. She responded, that every day she noticed the water falling onto the road, so she planted seeds on that particular side. Now, on one side of the road, there are a row of beautiful flowers, watered by the cracked pot.

God can use us, with our failings and our cracks. The light of God can shine through our cracks; we only have to let God use us, cracks and all. This is how we accept God’s steadfast love. We cry out to the Lord, I know I have failed, I know I have fallen, yet I want to offer you my life and my love. Use me, Lord, cracks and all. Let your steadfast love lift me up and give me life.

When we turn to God, when we return to God, then we live into the love that God offers to all of us. Then we honor the love of the Lord and we live a true and full life.

Movement 6 – The Sharing of God’s Love

Yet this love does not stop just with you and God. This is not a personal, individual love, but a love for all people. This is a love that is promised to all of God’s children, and we need to remember this. If this is a relational love, than shouldn’t it affect all of our other relationships? If this is a relational love, than shouldn’t we try to love those who God also loves? If this is a relational love, then to honor God, shouldn’t we honor the love God has for others?

This is the challenge of God’s steadfast love, that we are called to love others. The very ones whom we despise, the very ones whom we cannot tolerate, the very ones whom we look at with disdain are the ones we are to reach out to. We are to get to know them, be in relationships with them, honor them and respect them. Yet I don’t believe we are to just be nice to others. No, we are to call those to whom we reach out to reach out to God. We are to challenge them to claim their own relationship with God. The addict, the prostitute, the thief are all to turn to God. This is a big part of prison ministry; to enter into relationship with those in prison, to get to know them, and then to call the convict to turn to God.

Or maybe you know someone who does not love him or her self. Maybe you know someone who looks at him or her self and does not see anything of value and anything of worth. Get to know that individual, enter into a relationship with that individual, show the love of God in your life, and help that person experience the love of God in their own life. Let that person know that he or she is precious and is loved by God.

And then get out of the way. Don’t shape an individual’s relationship with God. Don’t judge an individual’s relationship with God. All you can do is show someone God, and then get out of the way. Remember, we are in no place to judge anyone’s relationship with the Lord, all we can do is show someone the way, and walk with that person all the way.

My brothers and sisters, we are loved by God. We are offered God’s steadfast love. It is a love that knows no boundaries, it is a love that knows no limitations, and it is a love offered to all of us. Let us follow the

example of Christ and share that love with all of those on the outside, with all of those that we are called to hate. Let us follow the example of Christ, and share the glorious love of God which the world needs to hear. Let us follow the example of Christ, and know that we are loved, that we are redeemed, and that we are blessed.

AMEN