

Back to the “Basics”

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I could stand up here and act like this sermon was super quick and easy to write... but that would be a lie. I actually had an original version of this sermon I ended up scrapping completely... and that original version was the longest it had ever taken me to write anything. If I'm being completely honest, I thought it would be quick to write when I first saw what the gospel reading was. I mean, the passage is about the things we are told from a very young age. Love others, don't judge, be forgiving, the golden rule of treating others the way you want to be treated. But, somehow, the sermon just didn't feel right to me. For some reason I felt like I was just going through the motions and just trying to say what I thought would be considered the “right” words to say. However, I found myself not really being able to completely stand behind what I was saying. When I finished the original version of this sermon, I remember telling my mom, “Well, it's done, but I'm not really sure how I feel about it.” I remember having a conversation with my sister in the car about how I was struggling to find the right words to say.

Because truthfully, I couldn't stand up here and say to simply forgive everyone... because it's not that simple. I don't know your stories; I don't know who has wronged you. And, quite frankly, some people just seemingly don't deserve forgiveness. I'm sure we can all think of an example of someone in history or the news or maybe even someone in our own lives who we just can't love or forgive or “turn the other cheek.” I mean, sure I can say with my words that I forgive someone, but I still find myself complaining about that person or holding a grudge deep down. I can't necessarily say that I LOVE that person. So, then I found myself asking, what good is the word “forgive” if I don't really mean it or if I am still upset with the person? But are we supposed to just let people do whatever they want or walk all over us?

Fast forward a few weeks to my drive home, and I found myself really questioning myself... as a person, as a Christian, my calling, just everything. I couldn't understand why it was so hard to write this sermon. This was supposed to be the basics! The things we learn from a young age! Why were the basics... not so basic? I couldn't figure out if it was the devil making me doubt and question myself, or if it was actually God trying to say that this isn't the right path for me.

But then, I kid you not, I'm not making this up, the very next song that played on the radio told me exactly the words I had been looking for. It was that type of moment I can't really explain where I realized that I was missing the entire point of the passage. The song is called “You Love Me Anyway” by Sidewalk Prophets, and there were several lyrics that I was connecting with, but I quickly want to read just a few lyrics of the song.

I am the thorn in your crown...
I am the sweat from Your brow...
I am the nail in Your wrist...
I am Judas' kiss... But You love me anyway.
It's like nothing in life that I've ever known, yes you love me anyway.

I also just want to quickly point out that the fact this song came on right as I was questioning myself... there's no way that could have been a coincidence. I went home that night, and when I tried to go to sleep, I found my mind racing and I couldn't quit thinking about it. So, all my points ended up being written entirely on my phone's note app at three in the morning.

But the point I'm trying to make is... God loves us anyway... even though WE don't deserve it. WE don't deserve His love or to be forgiven... not even one of us. Some of you may have thought about some extreme examples earlier of people who seemingly don't deserve love or forgiveness, or maybe just some people who simply upset you or let you down. Let me give a few examples.

A 40-year-old woman steals money from the church offering plate. A sixteen-year-old girl gossips about one of her peers as she walks down the hall. A coworker yells at you for seemingly no reason. A drunk driver runs into an oncoming car, killing the other driver. In situations like these, it can be hard to find love for these people. I mean, how can we possibly love those who do us wrong, persecute us, make us feel pain and sorrow? How can we forgive, pray for, and show this kind of love for these people?

Honestly, this kind of love sounds impossible for us... because it is on our own. It needs to be given to us first. And the good news is that it has been given to each and every one of us. In Romans, Paul says, "at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man...but God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Rarely will anyone die for good people, but Christ died for sinners and those who persecuted him. When Jesus was on the cross, condemned to death and mocked by mobs who were cheering for his suffering, he didn't think about revenge or show hatred towards them. Instead, he said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

If you can think of someone in your life who you think deserves your hatred or anger instead of your love, try to imagine how God should have felt about us. He created us in his image, gave us gifts and talents, provided us with families and possessions - but then we doubt him and blame him. We invent excuses to avoid his gifts, and we treat his commandments as suggestions. We live as if we know better than God, and we treat HIM as an enemy while we continue to ask for more. But despite all this, how did God respond? He sent his son to save us, and he let humanity curse him and kill him. And Jesus responded by saying, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing. The cross is what we deserved, but God loves us anyway.

None of us are perfect, so how can we judge other people? All of us are sinners, and all of us deserve punishment. But the good news is that God sees us, He sees our hearts, He sees our situations. Those four examples I mentioned earlier.

The woman stealing money from the offering plate. She lost her job and was raising two kids on her own. She had no money to feed her children.

The gossiping high school girl? She was insecure about herself because of her parents' unrealistic expectations.

The Co-worker who was yelling at you for seemingly no reason? His mother passed away from cancer just 2 days ago, and he was still dealing with his own pain.

The driver who caused the accident that killed another person. The driver feels awful and guilty about his mistake every day for the rest of his life in prison, feeling that he deserves nothing.

It's easier to love and have empathy for people when we have some context for these scenarios. In fact, it makes us even want to help them in some way. We are quick to judge and condemn other people when in reality, we are all humans and sinners, and we all fall short. But God, slow to anger, does not retaliate because he loves us even when we don't deserve it. He forgives you even when you don't deserve it.

It is definitely hard to love and forgive our enemies, but we don't need to be discouraged or question or doubt ourselves... because we can't do it on our own. This is like saying you need to run a marathon in 30 minutes or setting a limbo bar two centimeters above the ground. These may seem like the basics we learn from an early age, but the basics really aren't so basic. There's been only one person who has ever kept these commands, and it's Jesus. And the more we live for God and his will, and hold on to our belief in him, the more our love will be able to pour out onto others. I mean just look at Joseph with his brothers in our first Bible reading for this morning. The Holy Spirit works through us and guides us.

To wrap things up, I had a professor last semester who said something in class that has stuck with me, and it was, "Next time you look at a person who makes you angry, remember that God loves that person, and that person is still made in His image." While we may struggle and not always be able to completely love and forgive deep down the way God loves and forgives us, God's love for you, and everyone, is unconditional, and that is what frees you. It will allow you to find love for your enemies and turn the other cheek. We are all children of God created in his image. And these gifts have been given to you through Jesus Christ, your... and your enemies' ... Savior. Amen.