

The Hidden Treasure

A reflection given by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on May 10, 2020

Friendship Presbyterian Church

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.” (Matthew 13:44-46, NRSV)

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. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent [the] only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent [the] Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and [God’s] love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in [God] and [God] in us, because [God] has given us of [the] Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent [the] Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as [God] is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because [God] first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from [God] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (I John 4:7-21, NRSV)

My earliest memory is from a time I was three years old. It was Easter Sunday 1972, and I was in my Aunt Ruth’s backyard with my many cousins. I remember us laughing and running through the backyard ... looking around corners, behind trees, under bushes, and in the thick grass ... all for the hidden treasures we knew were there. And soon our fluffy Easter baskets would be full. Life fulfilled!

Jesus likens the search for life’s greatest truth and highest hope – the search for the living God – to a search for an elusive hidden treasure ... and then, to finding it ... and gladly exchanging all that one has for it. But the treasure *is* elusive. The scripture tells us that God is Love, and that sounds beautiful, but real life hands us a basketful of questions. Who of us does not wonder about God when the latest COVID-19 news comes to our TV screens? Who of us has not

wondered where the God of Love is when the innocent suffer? Who of us has not looked far and wide for answers in the midst of pain?

And beyond all these questions, is a God of Love what we really want? Is *Love actually* what we look for most from the Almighty? I mean that seriously, because it's not hard to come up with some attractive alternatives.

In a world in which a virus can destroy lives and disrupt livelihoods ... in which violent, destructive storms can drop upon a community in a moment ... In a world in which an earthquake can bring an entire nation to its knees ... In such a world, we might *most* yearn for a God of *Power* who can control nature and prevent senseless sicknesses, disasters, and violence ... a Divine Protector who will shield us and our loved ones from harm.

In a world upside down in which systems of exploitation and injustice continue to oppress ... In a world of moral confusion in which forgiveness and kindness are dismissed as weakness, and money and power decide what is right ... In such a world, we may most wish for a God of *Justice* who can ensure fairness and equal treatment for all in the eyes of the law ... A Guardian of the weak and vulnerable who every time can make good triumph over evil ... who would never stand by while children go hungry, or the old are neglected.

But where is the God of Power? Where is the God of Justice? Where can God be found? These are not just the ponderings of cynical skeptics ... *they are the questions of the Bible itself*. In some of the most agonizing words in all of scripture, the psalmist cries out,

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"* [Psalm 42:1-3, NRSV]

And yet even here, as we become weary in the struggle and longing ... we may yet be able to hear and receive another word. With stunning directness and brevity, John tells us what God is and what God is not. Whatever else may be true about the character of divine power or the nature of divine justice, John has nothing to say about these things. He looks beyond natural questions of ours to lift up something else.

We are in a way like the Old Testament prophet Elijah who looked in vain for God, as the sound and the fury of the great wind ... the mighty earthquake ... the blazing fire passed by. That Ultimate Reality we call God was not to be seen or heard in those things. It was to be heard, rather, in a "still small voice", or what another translation calls "a sound of sheer silence." [1 Kings 19:11-13]

In like fashion, John tells us, if you would see and know the Reality of God, then look into the quiet depths of the mystery of Love. If you look to omnipotent power or absolute justice, you

will look in vain. He uses an uncommon Greek word for it to make clearer what he means: *agapē* – a self-giving, self-sacrificing, unconditional Love.

A Love that chooses us before we choose it ...

A Love that pours itself out without expectation of repayment ...

A Love that perseveres even in the face of rejection ...

Such Love is rare, but when it is experienced, it is unforgettable. In diverse places and ways, in manners unheralded, it quietly graces life with beauty and transforms it, and heals it, and sets it free. And where that happens, the scripture tells us, *there is God*.

John did not reach this insight by rationalizing, or speculating, or philosophizing, or intuiting on the nature of Divinity. He did not reach it by projecting his natural desires or expectations on to the Heavens. He reached it because he and his fellow disciples *experienced* the life of Jesus.

They experienced one ...

- Whose opening pitch was never an argument or the answering of questions, but rather a simple call – “Follow me” – as if doing that would, in time, settle the mind and satisfy the heart;
- Who welcomed and loved those rejected by others, those dismissed or abused by others ... one who embraced the children, telling them that the Kingdom was theirs;
- Who was unafraid of approaching lepers and whose mere compassion could heal them with a touch;
- Who had a soft spot for the lost, the weak, and the all-too-human, but who reserved his harshness for the smug and the self-righteous;
- Who loved his people all the way to the cross, to the end; and whose powerful presence continued to be experienced beyond the end into a new beginning – empowering a small band of brothers and sisters to step out beyond the confining walls of fear, out into open lives that were wild and precious and free to share this Life with others.

And in all this, in so many ways, they perceived a Power fresh and new and life-giving, a Goodness beyond their imagining, silently at work reconciling and redeeming. Even in the presence of pain and questions, scales of blindness gradually fell from their eyes, and they learned to recognize the precious treasure in the heart of their lives. They came to know in their spirits that it is this Love alone which conquers Time and Death.

We at Friendship Church are living into this truth. We experience it every time we reach out in Love to one another, as we pray with and for one another ... as we carry one another. And as we continue this journey together, our vision of it becomes ever-sharper. Our questions don't go away, and our hearts still cry out, but we are rich in the treasure of God's Love, given and received, and where this Love is, where this Treasure is, there is also Peace.

To the glory of God!