

Wonder, Love, and Praise
Summer Saints Sermon Series: Jonathan Edwards (July 5, 2020)
Friendship Presbyterian Church

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1:12-17, NRSV)

Sometimes it's hard to fathom that we have been facing the threat of the coronavirus for almost four months now. But it's not like things have stood still. Rather than feeling better rested, with more time at home, we may well feel weary, with the outside world roaring on with a vengeance and with so much shaking our consciences.

As you all know, in the midst of all this, we have been carrying on our new tradition of the "Summer Saints" sermon series, which will run through July 28. Our summer saints were/are "saints" in exactly the same way that we are saints ... imperfect people created and loved by God, and sometimes used of the Spirit to convey something of God's majesty, love, and goodness.

As the list was settled on in mid-May, I have been moved by how *providential* the choices have proven to be. Albert Camus, Lilliam Smith, Dietrich Bonhoeffer ... all have been among the people we have most needed to hear from. In this recognition of the Spirit's working in mysterious ways, I look forward to the remainder of the series!

This Sunday, we take up the life and witness of the 18th-century American theologian and revivalist Jonathan Edwards, one of the key leaders in the Great Awakening, and the most influential forerunner of the great expansion of Protestant missionary work in the 19th century. His profound vision of the Beauty and Glory of God has had a deep influence on my own faith since my days at Princeton Theological Seminary, where Edwards was laid to rest in the town cemetery in 1758, and is still revered as arguably America's greatest theologian. I have truly been looking forward to this Summer Saint dedicatory sermon, as the last time my devotion could be expressed so well was with a certain nocturnal adventure in 1992 in which some dear seminary buddies and I hopped the Princeton Cemetery fence and held midnight vespers at Edwards' grave. For all the mischief of it, it came from hearts that were true.

Jonathan Edwards was born in East Windsor, Connecticut in 1703. He was the son and grandson of pastors, and the fifth child – and only son – among 11 children. He grew up in an atmosphere of Puritan piety, affection, and learning. After a rigorous schooling at home, he entered Yale at the age of 13 and graduated in 1720, but remained there for two years, studying divinity, and then after a brief pastorate in New York, returned to Yale for a few more years, earning a Master's degree.

In 1727 he became his grandfather's pastoral colleague at Northampton, Massachusetts and married Sarah Pierrepont, herself the daughter of a Connecticut pastor. They would ultimately go on to have 11 children together. When his grandfather died two years later, he became the sole occupant of the Northampton pulpit, the most important in Massachusetts outside of Boston.

Over the following few years there, Edwards developed through his preaching and writing a very Calvinist theology of our utter dependence upon God, in contrast to what he perceived as a growing assumption of religious and moral self-sufficiency. In November 1734, his sustained work saw a breakthrough: A series of sermons on "Justification by Faith Alone" led to a great revival in Northampton and along the Connecticut River Valley in the winter and spring of 1734–35, during which period more than 300 of Edwards' people made professions of faith. His subsequent report, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (1737), made a profound impression in America and Europe, particularly through his description of the types and stages of the conversion experience.

This experience and Edwards' account of it contributed greatly to the breakout of the Great Awakening throughout the American colonies, especially between 1740 and 1742. While many other leaders of the Awakening such as George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent were notable for their fiery, emotional sermons, Edwards himself always retained a relatively calm demeanor in the pulpit, reading his sermons as if they were academic lectures. Nevertheless, they produced profound and far-reaching effects.

The revivals were not without their critics, who often pointed to emotional excesses and overblown claims. Edwards, though acknowledging these very real weaknesses, defended the revivals as a genuine work of the Spirit in a number of hugely influential works in the early to mid-1740's, the most important of which was *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746).

For a man who was as brilliant, logical, and analytical as Edwards was, it is in this work on religious affections – on religious feelings and emotions – that we see the true heart of his theological vision. For Edwards, the essence of all true religion is not in its "reasonableness" or even its morality, but rather in "Holy Love" – a love that emerges from a transformed heart beset with the Beauty and Glory of God, and that proves its genuineness by its inner quality and its practical results.

After a dispute over admission to Communion, Edwards parted ways with the Northampton congregation in 1750, and soon after became pastor of a frontier church at Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and a missionary to the Indians there. Hampered by language difficulties, illness, Indian wars, and conflicts with powerful personal enemies, he nevertheless found time to write some of his most important works, developing his ideas further and that eventually led to a long overdue academic appointment – the presidency of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), arriving there in January 1758.

He had hardly assumed his duties when he contracted smallpox. His last words were spoken to his daughter Lucy and directed to his beloved wife Sarah who had not yet joined him in Princeton:

Dear Lucy, it seems to me to be the Will of God that I must shortly leave you, and therefore give my kindest Love to my dear Wife & tell her, that the uncommon Union that has so long subsisted between us has been of such a Nature as I trust is Spiritual and therefore will continue forever ...

I cite these last words not just because they are beautiful, but because they point beyond to that center of Edwards' faith – to what he calls a “delightful conviction” of the divine sovereignty, to a “new sense of the heart” that reveals God's glory in Scripture and in nature. It's a direct, intuitive apprehension of God in all his glory, a sight and taste of Christ's majesty and beauty far beyond all rational understanding, immediately imparted to the soul (as a 1734 sermon title puts it) by “a divine and supernatural light.” In this transformation alone do we human beings truly know God and truly know the depth of divine love for us.

In his “Personal Narrative,” written in 1737, he describes the first time he experienced God in this way:

The first instance that I remember of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things, that I have lived much in since, was on reading those words, I Timothy 1:17, “Now unto the King, eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever, Amen.” As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before. Never any words of Scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up to him in heaven; and be as it were swallowed up in him forever! I kept saying, and as it were singing, over these words of Scripture to myself; and went to pray to God that I might enjoy him; and prayed in a manner quite different from what I used to do, with a new sort of affection.”

This new sense of the heart, this new seeing, this transformation, changes everything, opening our eyes to God's glory in Nature and to the divine Beauty which surrounds us all the time:

Not long after I first began to experience these things, I gave an account to my father of some things that had passed in my mind. I was pretty much affected by the discourse we had together; and when the discourse was ended, I walked abroad alone, in a solitary place in my father's pasture, for contemplation. And as I was walking there, and looking up on the sky and clouds, there came into my mind so sweet a sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, that I know not how to express. — I seemed to see them both in a sweet conjunction; majesty and meekness joined together: it was a sweet and gentle, and holy majesty; and also a majestic meekness; an awful sweetness; a high, and great, and holy gentleness.

After this my sense of divine things gradually increased, and became more and more lively, and had more of that inward sweetness. The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, and moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind. I often used to sit and view the moon for a long time; and in the day, spent much time in viewing the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things; in the meantime, singing forth, with a low voice, my contemplations of the Creator and Redeemer ...

So, what do we do with all this – especially in times like these? Over these last several weeks and months we have seen our lives change profoundly and we have struggled with those changes, and these struggles have left many of us weary and grieving. And in our worship here, through the voices of Albert Camus, Lillian Smith, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we have been profoundly confronted with the call of the gospel to justice, but may wonder what we can do and feel powerless ... Where will the strength come from, to see our race to the end?

I have found in Jonathan Edwards an answer to this question, as he points us beyond his own time to the Everlasting Fountain of refreshment. Too often in Christian practice, we act as though the spiritual life – and disciplines of worship and prayer by which it's cultivated – are somehow an entirely different thing from social action and advocacy for peace and justice. The result is that we have many Christians who are all about "the spiritual life" with little apparent interest in any action beyond evangelism, and others who are seemingly *all* about social action, but with little apparent interest in worship or prayer. But this is a false choice.

Believing and living the gospel without striving for its justice for all of God's children is self-serving, empty, and vain. But this is true the other way too: Social action for peace and justice is unsustainable without a living, vital connection to the Source of all life. Without continually renewing itself in God's Glory and Love, even the best-intended action will dry up and wither away.

We heard the psalmist sing, "Worship the Lord in holy splendor" (Ps. 96:9, NRSV), or as the verse is rendered in the King James, "Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness." We can only take up and live the divine call to us today by being a people committed to worship and prayer, that we may be ever more fully rooted and nourished in that Beauty which alone can make all the world beautiful.

It is no coincidence that the very final scene in the entire Bible – when all has been made right and all that was broken has been healed – is a scene of worship before the Heavenly Throne. It's a scene evoked by our closing hymn today, and takes the form of a commitment prayer. Let it be ours –

*Finish, then, Thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

To the Glory of God! Amen.