

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Sunday, October 20, 2019
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“Appreciation Is the Key to Love”

Fifth in an eight-week “Be the Church” sermon series
“Love God”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Hebrew Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4-8
Christian Scripture: I John 4:16b-21



Welcome to the fifth sermon in our eight-week series “Be the Church”.



As I view our banner, I and others like my friend, Clyde Johnson, do not think the themes are listed in order of importance and therefore of priority. In fact, one might justifiably think that this week’s theme,

‘Love God’, should be the first in our series, for it is seminal. In fact, I likely would have begun our series with ‘Love God’, had not Jim Antal begun our series with the environment. I could also have used ‘Love God’ as the dénouement of our series, if I were not saving two themes related to resources for our stewardship campaign next month.



Biblical tradition has it that ‘the authority’ Moses wrote the book of Deuteronomy as one of the first five books of the Bible (the Torah). Now keep in mind, that this not only would have made Moses the first prophet, but also an extremely accurate one, as he would have written about his own death and burial in chapter 34!



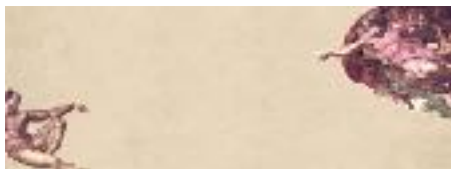
Now Moses’ book Deuteronomy had somehow in the past become ‘lost’ in the Temple until Israel’s King Josiah very conveniently

‘rediscovered’ it, under a temple sofa no doubt, and revealed it to his people. In finding the long-lost book, Josiah sought to institute reforms - he desired to bring a wayward Israelite people back into a faithful covenant with God.



In one of the most memorable and recited passages of the Bible, Moses instructs us through the book of Deuteronomy “To love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5).

I find loving God difficult for three reasons (all good things come in three!).



One, God often feels distant, even unknown to me - and I find it hard to love someone who I do not know. Thus far, the most effective means I have found by which to know God is to spend time with that which God created. And that is you, each and every one of you!



God created you. The more time I spend with each of you, the more I know and appreciate you and thus God. I so enjoy visiting your homes because inevitably, and I think I can say without fail, the more time I spend with you in your homes, the more my love for you grows. God also created those who struggle with addiction and gather in our church for meetings (Alcoholics Anonymous). God created those little ones under Nan's care (Brattleboro Centre for Children). God created those who are hungry, be it their own fault or not, and come to our church for food (Loaves & Fishes).



God also created the Earth. So, *she* is to be appreciated. God created Lake Spofford, Mt. Wantastiquet, and the stunning autumn colors that adorn our hills. When we intentionally seek out opportunities to spend

time with and appreciate that which God created, here in Vermont and around the world, we are better able to love God.

I believe strongly that the more we spend time with God, the more we are able to know, appreciate, and love God.



At Centre Church we spend time with God during Sunday morning worship, during Shiva's guided meditation, and when Nan and I gather for our morning Father Richard Rohr podcast. We also spend time with God during our private devotionals. "Being the Church" means spending time with God in order to know more clearly, and thus increase our love for, God.



Two, I find it hard to love God because I often experience a world that drives me to despair. This past Friday evening, our faith community agonized and held vigil with the Everett, Grobe, and Vose families who for a year have known only gut-wrenching sorrow and who contemplate still more pain. Today after the worship service, we will mourn the loss of a faithful servant of our church, Jeanne Rueter. Jeanne's children have lost a dear and precious mother whom they cherished the *entirety* of their lives. So, in addition to God sometimes feeling distant, I also struggle to love God because God seems to force you and I to walk through these deep emotional and spiritual valleys caused by death's shadows. "Being the Church" means coming together as we did Friday and as we do today, not to wallow in grief, but to come to a greater understanding that our grief is actually an expression of our appreciation to God for the gift of life. Our grief is a visible expression of our love for one another and even of God. Our grief is an expression that we value and give thanks for that which is given to us by God - our own and each other's lives!



As we hold the Rueter, Everett, Grobe, and Vose families in our prayers, we remember that God created the Coast Redwood tree that can live over two-thousand years.



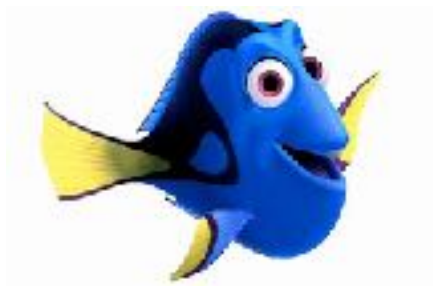
God also created the butterfly that lives but a season (depending on the species, butterflies live twelve months to, for one species in Costa Rica, only two days). Yet, are not both the Redwood and the butterfly incredibly complex and beautiful creations that God loves? And is it not so that some of us will live long and others of us short? Yet, are we all not equally complex and beautiful in God's sight? Whether we are an old Redwood or a fleeting butterfly, God loves us equally.



Our scripture from I John provides us a simple and clear reason to love God: because God first loved us (I John 4:19). And this makes perfect sense to me. We know as parents that that which we often love

is that which we created. And we know as children that that which created us, our parents, we also love. It is the perhaps the act of *being* created and the ability for us to create others that motivates us to love. God is our Creator. And God loves that which God creates, be it the earth, be it the environment, be it any and all living creatures, including ourselves! And just as the love of a parent for a child is reciprocated, so the love that God has for us is to be reciprocated. Whether we are a Redwood or a butterfly, let us love God our Creator because he loved us first.

And in conclusion, three: I find I struggle to love God because when it comes to spiritual matters I have the memory of a goldfish! Or rather than a goldfish, a Blue Tang fish (A.K.A. regal tang, surgeonfish, and *Paracanthurus hepatus*).



Are we all not like the animated fish ‘Dory’ in Pixar’s animated film “Finding Nemo”, who can’t recall anything for more than a few moments? We are easily distracted and quickly forget - to even love God.



So, the Deuteronomist encourages us to teach our children to love God (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). We are advised to talk about loving God at home and on the road, when we lie down, and when we wake-up. There is a reason why we must have symbols all around us and even on us to remind us to love God. Therefore, “Being the Church” entails investing in our Sunday School and educating our children about God’s love for them. As we all know, instruction must be drummed into our children as well as ourselves. We have the cross here, to always remind us of Jesus’ sacrifice. We have the baptismal font and the communion table to remind us of God’s covenant with us and our covenant to one another. “Being the Church” entails my meeting with Woman’s Spirit and hearing again and again and again, every week, from them the wisdom of God, as if I was hearing it for the first time. I’m nurtured by Women’s Spirit and I am eager to attend it, because during the course

of the week my memory fades; I forget the lessons I learned last week and I need to hear them again and again.



‘Loving God’ is intentional because God can seem unknown, God can seem uncaring, and we have such short memories. Therefore, let us continue to “Be the Church” together, reminding ourselves that God is near, God walks with us through the shadow of death, and we love God because God loves us first.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, “Amen”.