

March 15, 2015

## **“Risking Forgiveness: Overwhelming Us with Love”**

Sermon by Rev. Robert English



*John 3:14-21*

*And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”*

Last week, in her sermon, Rev. Patricia began by sharing this wonderful and mind-blowing news: scientist in Ethiopia discovered some ancient human remains that expanded instantly timeline of human evolution by 400,000 years. 400,000 years older than we previously thought. 400,000 is a pretty big number and a year is a pretty long time - combine the two and it's almost too big to even comprehend.

I can remember being in elementary school around this time of year and thinking to myself, is this year ever going to end? We call it a 'school year' when it's not even a full year, imagine if we had 400,000 of those. I had this similar experience the other day when I was on my Ipad and I got on the google maps app. When you use google maps on your Ipad there is this little blue dot which represents you and your current location. There was my little blue dot which represents the space that I inhabit in this world, sitting there on the corner of Princeton and Washington here in Santa Monica- and I did the Google map pinching motion and suddenly the map zoomed out to the Westside of LA and my dot got smaller, and then I did the pinching motion again and it zoomed out to the state of California and other western states, and again until it was all of North American, and one more time and I was looking at a map of the entire world and my little blue dot, clinging to the edge of the southwestern part of the United States.

It is one of the moments that makes you feel really small.... one of those moments that reminds you just how darn big this world actually is. When you think about our human history expanding by 400,000 years and somehow just the thought of that changes the way that you view your week, your month, your year, or maybe even your life.

Like when you're walking with purpose, with an agenda, your blinders are on, caught up in your own head and something forces you to stop, look up, and you remember that there is a world out there, that life is a dance and you are not always leading, that moment when you think no matter how big you might feel, or how important your job might seem, you are a small blue dot clinging to the edge of the Southwestern part of the United States.

This feeling is captured brilliantly in this Carl Sagan quote inspired by looking at a picture of earth from the Voyager 1 space probe, he wrote:

“Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every 'superstar', every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there- on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.”

We are in the season of Lent, the season of reminding ourselves that we are dust and to dust we shall return, dwelling in this truth that we inhabit a small part of the world and that our lives are a series of temporary moments which pass one to the next, on this mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

It can be a bit jarring when it suddenly strikes you, just how small we actually are, and it seems as though it can lead in us one of two directions- it can lead us into death, or into life, into darkness or into the light.

It's not hard to imagine how this the reality of our existence, could lead someone into despair or defeat, or cause them to retreat into a sense of meaninglessness, or, to just go on about life just ignoring or numbing themselves to it all, avoiding the reality that we are formed from dust and returning to dust.

Or maybe it can be absolutely liberating. Maybe it can lead us into life. Maybe it can make us more humble in recognizing our place in the universe, maybe it can enable us to see the futility of human arrogance, or maybe it can help us to see each moment of this life as absolutely precious and a gift of divine love.

As we hear in the gospel this morning:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believed in him would not perish but have eternal life. Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

God so loved the world. This speck of dust suspended in the sunbeam. God so loved the world. All of us little blue dots running to and fro for the past 2.8 billion years. God so loved the world, that God gave the gift of Jesus Christ, forgiving love in the flesh, that we could know the way of life and light.

It is God whose unbelievable generosity is shown in the giving of Jesus for the salvation of the whole world. It is this gift of pure-sacrificial-forgiving love, without prior any condition or prior commitment.

The Apostle Paul wrote about it in this way in his letter to the Romans: Indeed rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, but God proves [God's] love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:7-8)

No prior condition met. No prior commitment made.

We hold true to this belief passed down generation to generation, that all of this is a gift given from God, the gift of grace, without any strings attached.

The thing about gift giving is that it is always a risky endeavor. There is this huge risk that the gift may not be accepted. To put it more bluntly, that the gift might even be rejected.

Have many of us have had the feeling, that little bit of excitement which quickly turns into anxiety when we are wrapping a gift for a loved one- the thing that we saw and thought immediately of them and had to get it..... not the gift that they let us know that they wanted? There is that moment of vulnerability and even a little bit of fear that the gift won't be received, that the gift will be rejected in some way. But we wrap it anyway, we give it anyway for the sake of our love for the other person.

This passage in John, this teaching from Jesus in John 3:16-17 reminds us that God loved the world and us enough to give us freedom, because true love requires freedom. It reminds us that God loved the world enough to risk forgiveness, because Jesus came into the world not to condemn the world but that it might be saved through him. It reminds us God loved the world enough to give us the gift of eternal life, knowing that at times we would reject that gift, that we would choose death, that we would love the darkness more than the light.

What is most important for us to key into here in this passage is that eternal life, especially as Jesus teaches us in the gospel of John, is not just life beyond this life, but eternal, abundant life in the here and now. We call it a realized eschatology, which means is that the fullness of life, the totality of God's salvific, life-forgiving love is available right here and now, with each and every breath, each and every move that we make in our tiny lives in this part of the world. Each moment is holy and sacred, each moment is a chance to experience grace and respond with gratitude.

Jesus teaches us that we are not to give into the despair, darkness or life-diminishing actions of the world, we are called to be a part of the eternal life giving love of God embodied in him and his sacrifice for the forgiveness and salvation of all human kind. God's unbelievably generous gift for the whole world.

I wanted to take us back to that picture from the Voyager 1 space probe, the mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam. How small we can feel when we see our tiny blue dot on a google map of the entire world. When your mind is blown at church learning that we 400,000 years older than we previously imagined.

These thoughts, this perspective is a gift of grace. It helps us to re-frame our life in light of God's story instead of our story. It helps us to understand and see how small and petty we can be sometimes. It puts us in our

proper place and context and it calls us into accountability for all of those things that we fear, things we are worried about, things that we are ashamed of, all the grudges that we are holding, or that resentment which has crept into our hearts.

It helps us to see how small they actually are and how little power they have, especially when compared to how big and beautiful and wondrous our God is, this God who loves the whole world.

This is the way in which God's grace works in our lives. God overwhelms us with a love which heals all brokenness, forgives all our sins and restores us to new life. It is this love which seeps into our hearts and casts out all fear, it is this love which reframes our existence from despair into joy, from anxiety into peace, from struggle into rest, from resentment into relationship, from isolation into reconciliation, from death into life.

And it is this overwhelming, unbelievable love, which in the form of the cross bears all things, endures all things and risks all things. And we, my brothers and sister are called to bear this story, this good news, to proclaim it with our mouths and with our lives, to risk being foolish enough to forgive others and to try, if only for a fleeting moment to love others as we are loved by God.