

Message for 3-20-22

Shared by Rev. Ken Heintzelman

*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 judgment, because as he 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 he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; those who do not love a brother or sister they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. 1 John 4*

You may find yourself wandering through the wilderness of life and stumble out of that wilderness into a clearing, a refuge, a sanctuary called Shadow Rock. In this clearing, there are three campfires; a campfire for traditional theists, a campfire for non-theists, and a campfire for atheists. You can go to any of these campfires and you can sing songs, warm your hands, share your story and find a good company. At the center of the clearing at an equal distance from each campfire is a table. It is the Table of Jesus. It is a table of grace, generosity, service, love, and hope. It is the table where all are welcome. Once a month everyone is invited to put their beliefs on a shelf and leave them behind and join in unity around the Table of Jesus. Everyone shares bread and a cup where we act out our core values of inclusion, justice, and intimacy of spirit. It is acting out of what the world is called to be. When we are done we go back to our campfires in the clearing of Shadow Rock having honored everyone's journey.

In the first church I served in Crofton, KY I let myself be dragged into a deeper conflict, beyond, and before me. The challenges were lies, hostility, and fear. In a conversation with one of the most hurt and fear-filled people, she questioned something I had said or done. I do not remember what it was but I knew I had addressed it in the sermon the week before. I asked her, "Do you remember what I said last Sunday?" She responded in a very sarcastic and dismissive way, "I suppose it was something about love."

When we think about a fear-based theology we usually think about a formula of salvation from hell. Many congregations promote a view that you must believe the right thing, the right way, at the right time to not go to the fiery pits of eternal damnation. The formula also includes eliciting loyalty to a church for salvation from hell. This is the starkest expression of fear-based theology but it has been softened over the last century. The softer version of Hell-lite is still a fear-based theology. The Hell-lite version offers that it is the love of God that gives us an escape hatch from hell and it is the love of Jesus through the Church that the method of escape is offered. Even with this softened version, a fear-based theology with the threat of hell is at the root. The church makes this the *quid pro quo* of God.

Let us pray.

Spirit of Life and Love, sometimes we fall short and add to the trauma of people's lives and cause more injury to their bodies and souls. We confess this, not to wallow in guilt and shame but to own the way we sometimes use fear and shame to get our ways. We confess that sometimes we are burdened and swayed by fear and use it as a weapon. For all the times your people do atrocities in your name, we are sorry. In such naming of this sin of the Church may we have the power to do better and add to the healing of the world. Amen.

God is not transactional like human beings. It is always God's way in the fullest measure. I love the story in the book of Joshua where Joshua meets the "commander of the Lord's army." This meeting takes place outside of the city of Jericho and Joshua asks whose side is he on. The "commander" says, "No. I am on no human side. I go when, where, and how God sends me." Joshua's only response was to fall down, worship, and ask what am I to do for you". This is a model for our conversation with life.

This fear-based transactional theology is not who I am, and I think it is not who we are as a congregation but I will not speak for all of you. I will give my witness and declare myself.

I do not think people believe in hell. Even though it is often preached by Christian pastors, I do not think people really believe it. We will allow other people to believe it. We will allow institutions to be built on the idea of hell. It is only a shadow on the wall. It is an illusion that is used to manipulate and coerce people, but because it has become such a transactional cornerstone of the shallow contemporary Christian faith, it is a secret that no one shares. In our families, the people who benefit from secrets are the most fear-filled dysfunctional members and this is true in the family of God as well.

Faith has layers of meaning. Marcus Borg unpacks the word in his book, The Heart of Christianity. Faith can mean belief, loyalty, and trust. I do not believe in hell. I do not trust that such a place exists. My worldview and purpose do not depend on loyalty to such an idea. Just for the record, I think the emphasis on faith being trust is missing in most spiritualities. I cannot and will not offer a formula for salvation from hell because my understanding of scripture and my journey does not allow me to do so. If I were to do so, I would lack more integrity than I already do as a broken human vessel of truth and love.

Today's Word About Life encourages us to see the opposite of fear is not courage. The opposite of fear is love. For sure, it takes courage to love and it is love that transforms a life of death into a love for life.

I know that the concept of hell has some appeal. Hell has great appeal especially when we apply its necessity to other people. When I watch the suffering of thousands and millions of people caused by a few hateful, fearful, greedy, power-hungry people I want there to be hell. A special kind of hell just for them. However, I know this is my petty human spirit and not the Spirit of Life and Love that can dwell within me.

When I read the Word About Life and I let it challenge me, break my finite understandings, comfort my weak spirit, and stretch me into new understandings and new relationships, then I can commit myself to a ministry that is love-based and not fear-based. I want to commit myself to a ministry that is love at the beginning, love at the end, and love all in between. I know the rightness of this and I have seen glimpses of this in our life together as Shadow Rockers. I need the deep wisdom of the Word About Life to understand how to do it and we need each other to do it.

We have this metaphor of the campfires and it helps us to grasp and share our complex identity. I want to read it as it is informed by today's Word About Life.

You may find yourself wandering through the wilderness of life (a world that struggles because it specializes in fear and struggles to love). You may stumble out of that wilderness into a clearing, a refuge, a sanctuary called Shadow Rock. In this clearing, there are three campfires; a campfire for traditional theists (who believe love was made flesh), a campfire for non-theists (who believe God is existence itself and best expressed in acts of love), and a campfire for atheists (who believe what can be measured with science will only open more mysteries and questions, and trust that love is another way to talk about all creative energy). You can go to any of these campfires and you can sing songs, warm your hands, share your story and find a good company. At the center of the clearing at an equal distance from each campfire is a table. It is the Table of Jesus. It is the Table of Love. It is a table of patience, kindness, humility, grace, generosity, service, and hope. It is the table where all people are welcome. The table practice of Shadow Rock is that once a month everyone is invited to put their beliefs on a shelf because in humility we all know that we really know nothing, leave campfires behind, and join in unity around the Table of Love. Everyone shares bread and a cup where we act out our core values of inclusion, justice, and intimacy of spirit. This table practice is our ritual way of acting out the vision of love that the world is called to be. When we are finished, we go back to our campfires in the clearing of Shadow Rock because we cannot live on the mountain forever, but we have peace and joy having honored everyone's journey.

This is our purpose. This is our destiny. Our building doesn't matter. Our programs don't matter. I don't matter. What matters is God is love, we love because God first loved us, and we make love our God.