

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta

“God Is Love” (1 John 4:8-10)

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When I was a teenager in the 80’s, a *great* time to be a teenager, there was a number one hit by the band Foreigner entitled “I Want to Know What Love Is” (from their 1984 album *Agent Provocateur*)—an incredibly cheesy song but hugely popular because at the end of the day, that is exactly what all of us want to know:

I’ve gotta take a little time
A little time to think things over
I better read between the lines
In case I need it when I’m older

Now this mountain I must climb
Feels like the world upon my shoulders
But through the clouds I see love shine
It keeps me warm as life grows colder

In my life there’s been heartache and pain
I don’t know if I can face it again
Can’t stop now, I’ve traveled so far
To change this lonely life

I wanna know what love is
I want you to show me
I wanna feel what love is
I know you can show me

If you went roller skating in the mid 80’s, which I did frequently, this song would definitely be played during the “couples only” skates as the deejay would proclaim over the PA system “This song is for couples only—if you are skating by yourself, please clear the floor—couples only please.” If the “couples only” song wasn’t “I Want to Know What Love Is” by Foreigner, it had to be a song by Journey...but I digress.

“I Want to Know What Love Is”...you hear that song one way when you are fifteen, counting down the days till you get your driver’s license—and you hear it another way when you’ve grown older and your youngest kids are about to graduate from college. The truth is there are times in your life when you gotta think things over and you need to read between the lines, times when you feel like you are climbing a mountain with the world on your shoulders, times when there’s been heartache and pain and you don’t know if you can face it again. “I want to know what love is—I want you to show me”—that is the cry of the human heart.

And that is exactly what today’s passage from the First Letter of John is all about, as the evangelist wrote:

God is love. God’s love was revealed among us this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:8-10).

In response to a world crying out, “I want to know what love is—I want you to show me”, God, who is love, responded by sending his Son Jesus Christ so you could know what love is. When Jesus died on the cross for you to atone for all your sins and to assure you eternal life, he showed you “what love is.” After the Last Supper Jesus told his disciples, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13) and the next day he did just that. In his Letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul says the same thing in different way, “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Yes, God is love—and yes, God loves you that much.

In his last book *All Is Grace*, the late Brennan Manning put it this way: “My message, unchanged for more than fifty years, is this: God loves you unconditionally, as you are and not as you should be, because nobody is as they should be. It is the message of grace” (192). In other words, grace is God’s unconditional love. Brennan Manning was a brilliant preacher and writer—a Catholic priest who decided to get married which meant he was no longer a Catholic priest, an alcoholic who succumbed to relapses throughout his life, a man who struggled with depression and whose marriage ended in divorce—in other words, like each one of us, Brennan Manning was someone with a checkered past.

And when Brenna Manning preached about the love of God, assuring people again and again “God loves you unconditionally, as you are and not as you should be, because nobody is as they should be”, he faced a lot of resistance. Detractors told him he was preaching “cheap grace” and scolded him because of the troubles in his personal life—as if he was not already fully aware of them.

And yet thankfully, Brennan Manning never deviated from preaching the actual gospel about the actual love of God for you as you actually are. He just kept preaching about God’s love, preaching about God’s grace—he never stopped. And in doing so, Brennan Manning helped countless people experience the actual gospel in their actual life—as he did with Yours Truly when I was a disillusioned college student—and again years later when I was a young (and rather clueless) husband and dad. Manning further describes this love, this “vulgar grace” of God:

My life is a witness to vulgar grace—a grace that amazes as it offends. A grace that pays the eager beaver who works all day long the same wages as the grinning drunk who shows up at ten till five. A grace that hikes up the robe and runs breakneck toward the prodigal reeking of sin and wraps him up and decides to throw a party no if, ands, or buts. A grace that raises bloodshot eyes to a dying thief’s request—“Please remember me”—and assures him, “You bet!” A grace that is the pleasure of the Father, fleshed out in the carpenter Messiah, Jesus Christ, who left His Father’s side not for heaven’s sake but for our sakes, yours and mine. This vulgar grace is indiscriminate compassion. It works without asking anything of us. It’s not cheap. It’s free, and as such will always be a banana peel for the orthodox foot and a fairy tale for the grown-up sensibility. Grace is sufficient even though we huff and puff with all our might to try to find something or someone it cannot cover. Grace is enough (193-194).

The gospel always goes back to the love of God—again, as John wrote:

God is love. God’s love was revealed among us this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:8-10).

God is love—that is the gospel.

My first experience of the gospel took place when I was a four year old attending Vacation Bible School. At that point in my life my family had not begun attending church, so initially it all felt very strange. But there were three songs we sang every day at that Vacation Bible School: “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” “Jesus Loves the Little Children”, and “Jesus Loves Me.” I don’t remember any of the teachings, or any of the other activities—except snack time, of course (snack time was awesome, still is)—but I never forgot those songs.

Those simple songs were about God holding the world in his hands—and therefore you and me, about God loving all the children in the world—including you and me, and about God loving each of us individually and unconditionally as we are and not as we should be—“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” It all stuck with me, so several years later when our family began attending church and I began hearing sermons about God’s love and grace—and participating in the liturgies in the Episcopal Church that are centered on experiencing God’s love and grace—it all resonated and connected with those songs I learned—and it felt like I had come home. I was reminded again that God’s love for me has always been and would always be, very real. And of course, God’s love for you is also very real.

The gospel always goes back to the love of God, the grace of God—always. God understands what it is like in your life when there is a mountain you must climb and it feels like the world is on your shoulders. God loves you even when (*especially* when) there’s been heartache and pain and you don’t know if you can face it again—and proved that love as Jesus climbed Mount Calvary and in carrying the cross carried the world he created, and carried you, on his shoulders. This means even through the clouds in your life you can still see God’s love shine, God’s love that keeps you warm if your life grows colder.

The gospel is good news for those who want to know what love is, because God has shown us in Jesus Christ—and because God knows we also need to feel what love is he does just that in the sacraments of God’s love unconditional love, God’s vulgar grace. God’s love is not a “couples only skate”—God’s love is for everyone, including you. And even if you feel like you’re skating alone, there is Someone skating with you. You already know who that is...for God is love.

Amen.