

Message: Do You Love God?**God loves you!**

I’m here to tell you that wonderful news this morning. If you walk away after today’s service and never come back (& I’m not suggesting you do so!), that’s the one thing I want you to take away. God loves you...and you...and you...and me.

I stand before you today as proof that God loves us, in spite of the things we do or say. You see, a year after I graduated from college I went through a divorce, difficulties in graduate school and with my lifestyle. Those challenges led me to turn away from God. I spent 25 years away from the church. I was striving to achieve what the world says we need to have to be successful: power, fame and fortune. I’d turned away from God and really wasn’t interested in messages of love and kindness. Do any of you ever feel like the church has it wrong and society has right? If so, we have a common bond.

Do you know God loves you? How do you know? Are you a person like John Wesley, who felt his heart “strangely warmed” when he was reborn spiritually: “born again,” as we say today? Or are you someone who’s always known and felt the presence of God in your life, from the time you were a child until today? Or are you in-between: you think God loves you some days, but you’re not so sure at other times?

One way to know God loves you is to experience God’s presence.

I’m not talking about a feeling, an emotional response, but something deep down inside us, when our spirit reacts in a new way. I won’t ask if you have experienced God or not. You wouldn’t be here today if God’s divine presence wasn’t active in your life. If your spirit isn’t being touched and fed, spending time in church wouldn’t make sense. Isn’t the primary reason we gather on Sunday morning to experience God’s presence? Yes, the sanctuary’s beautiful, the people are friendly, the music’s great and we know there’ll be refreshments later. But that isn’t why we come to church, week in and week out, is it? Of course not!

We come to church to be in the presence of the living and holy God.

We come to church to worship and praise God together. We come to church to listen to God through prayer. We come to church to receive

grace through the sacraments of holy communion and baptism. We come to church to give honor and glory to God through our gifts and offerings. We come to church to hear the Word of God proclaimed. We come to church because it’s the one place where we come to give love back to God. We come to church to give thanks for all God does for us the other 167 hours of the week.

During the 25 years I was away from the church, my head ruled.

My heart came in second and, sometimes, third. There were things in my head about the Bible, life and the world that I just couldn’t resolve. When I was in my late 30s, I went through another set of challenges – things I had no control over. I was stuck in a rut and knew it, but I didn’t know how to change my life. I was at the end of my rope. But God knew what to do. God changed my heart in January 2000. I was reborn spiritually. The change happened from the inside out: my heart took the lead and my head had to learn to catch up. Have you experienced that radical transformation in your life? How do your head and heart work together in God’s love?

Let’s ask the question another way: have you heard God’s call?

Before we can know God’s love in a deep, spiritual way, we have to know that we aren’t just responding to the passion of a moment (or to late night spicy food!) God loves everyone and calls everyone, but not everyone hears or responds. Let’s look at God’s call to Abram, found in our scripture reading from Genesis 12:1-4.

There are some important aspects of the narrative. God had a purpose for calling Abram, just as God has a purpose for calling us. God called Abram to give him a blessing and to make his family a blessing to all the families of the world. Wow! That’s an amazing offer. Guess what? The offer still stands today. God wants to bless your life and your family. What God does will not only change you and your loved ones, it’ll change the lives of people you meet. God made us for a reason: to be a blessing to the people we meet every day.

There are a couple of other points to touch on. First, God’s call has no age limit. Abram heard God’s call, picked up his family and moved (on camel back, no less) – at the ripe, young age of 75! The work of the Lord isn’t just for the young and energetic. It’s for all who have ears to

hear. Second, God’s call takes precedence over everything else. God called Abram to leave his country, people and family behind, traveling to a place he’d never been; trusting in God every step of the way. That’s a sure sign of deep love and trust. But it’s not all that unusual for those who love God, is it? Today, missionaries travel to other countries, pastors itinerate, people leave to plant new churches. Those who love and care for God find a way to say “yes” to the prompting of God’s Spirit, that invisible wind we feel deep down in our soul. Is the Spirit prompting you to step outside of your comfort zone to follow Jesus?

God called me after 25 years for a purpose. While in the desert period of life, I struggled with my view of God. In effect, I was worshipping false images of God. Has that been a problem for you? Like me, perhaps you’ve worshipped a God-of-impossible-expectations, a God-who-cannot-be-pleased? When perfectionism is a key motivation in our life, we tend to want to worship God in that way. We’re driven and compulsive and won’t accept anything less. Maybe you worship a God-who-doesn’t-care? Perhaps your family was distant or stoic when you grew up, so you see God as removed from the world, transcendent and uncaring? That way leads to struggles with despair, particularly in a world where there’s so much pain and suffering. Perhaps you had a harder life and so you find yourself worshipping a God-who-abuses? That way can make us fearful or even freeze us, making change difficult.

God’s radical love turns our lives upside-down, changing us from the inside-out. That’s scary. The limits aren’t in God. They’re in us. God’s love is more than we can imagine: it’s greater than sin, death and the bounds of the universe. That’s a powerful message of hope and promise. That’s what Jesus was teaching Nicodemus in John 3. Nicodemus was a learned man, a member of the Jewish ruling council and a prominent teacher, a Pharisee. Today, he would be an Ad Board member or Sunday School teacher or church leader – past or present; basically most of us here. Jesus speaks to this learned man about spiritual health, but that confuses Nicodemus. Like many of us, he’d rather hear about material things than heavenly, spiritual things. God’s love is so simple a child knows it, yet so deep it puzzles even those who’re learned. There’s an expression, “In the divine Scriptures, there

are shallows and there are deeps; shallows where the lambs may wade, and deeps where the elephant may swim.”¹ That’s a good description of God’s love and nature.

Nicodemus had a problem many of us share today. We find it difficult to accept God’s love. We want to do something to earn it, find favor, to have merit in God’s eyes. Tell me what to do to have God’s love and earn eternal life and I’ll do it! The problem: God’s love is freely given by grace. Grace is undeserved, unmerited, unearned favor. It’s a free gift from God. All we can do is surrender and receive it. And that’s the problem. We tend to see grace as something we’re entitled to (we aren’t) or we want to accept God’s love with conditions. We want God’s help in these areas of our life, but not in those areas of our life, so we try to pick and choose how we’ll accept God’s love. That limits us.

That’s what happened to me. Even though my heart changed when I was reborn spiritually, I held things back. Sure, I wanted the joy and excitement of a new life, but I didn’t really have a good self-image. After all, I was a failure. What could God want with me? My first job in the church was as a custodian. The pastor, who was four months older than me, loved telling everyone he had the only “Ph.D. custodian” in New England. Don’t get me wrong: it was a good job. It allowed me to spend time in the church, praying as I worked, being around other Christians, allowing God’s grace to “rub off.” And I began to un-learn some bad habits and develop good, new habits. My view of God changed. I began to hold less and less back from God.

Maybe that’s where you are today. “As we begin to see God as loving, we come to believe that we’re lovable. As we begin to see that God wants us to let go of our self-destructive behaviors to live more fully, we come to believe that we’re precious and valuable. Ezekiel 11:19 says, “*I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.*” God promises us a heart transplant. God promises to change us. Our stone heart will be removed and replaced with a heart of flesh.

A heart of stone is a dead heart. It’s closed to honest, intimate relationships. A heart of stone is unmerciful with itself and with others.

¹ Rev. John Owen, 1616-1683

But we do become attached to our hearts of stone. We find ourselves fearing God's promised transplant. Our stone hearts have one thing in their favor - they allow us to feel strong and to appear strong to others. A stone heart is a protected heart. It seems invulnerable. You can't wound a heart of stone.

God's offer of a heart transplant is a promise of life. A heart of flesh is alive. Only a flesh heart can feel joy. Only a flesh heart can celebrate. Only a heart of flesh can give and receive love. But, the vulnerability of a heart of flesh scares us. A flesh heart does not seem as well-protected as a heart of stone. It can feel joy, but it can also feel pain. You can wound a heart of flesh.”²

That’s what makes surrendering to God challenging. The fear of being hurt, rejected, judged or condemned by friends, family and others, keeps us enslaved. We’re caught in our sins and the lies we tell ourselves and others. That’s why Jesus’ words to Nicodemus in John 3:17 are so powerful, “*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’s love doesn’t condemn. It frees us from the hurt, lies and shame of the world. God’s love drives out fear. God’s love is made perfect and it’s most powerful when we feel most vulnerable. That’s because we aren’t relying on our strength then. We’re relying on God’s strength. And that simple, pure act of faith changes lives, blesses families and creates nations filled with hope.

God called Abram and all of his spiritual descendents to be a blessing to the world. We’re Abram’s spiritual descendents. God calls us to hear and accept Jesus as our Savior. When we’re born again, we’re doubly blessed. Not only are we washed clean in God’s eyes, we’re made new, beginning with a heart transplant. God transforms selfish, stone hearts into living, spirit-filled hearts. A person with a heart for God can’t help themselves. They can’t keep from sharing God’s blessing with others. Nothing can hold them back, even their own fear and timidity. God wants to bless us to make us fruitful. The best way to receive God’s abundant blessing: empty yourselves by pouring God’s

² Source: Dale & Anita Ryan, NACR; www.nacr.com

love into others, blessing them. When you empty yourself, you’re a cup waiting for God’s grace to fill to overflowing.

So I invite you to share God’s blessing this week. Do it at home, your small groups, the marketplace, everywhere you go. At this point, you’re probably thinking “Okay, I’m game, but how?” There’s no better time to begin than the present. Please turn to the person seated next to you and ask this question:

“How may I ask God to bless you?”

Please pray for God to bless them (silently or as you choose).

Thank you for sharing with each other. I know it was uncomfortable. We either never learned how to do it or we’re out of practices. I can tell you blessing others gets easier the more you do it. After all, God made us to do so.

In the weeks ahead, we’ll make time during the service to share the blessings we gave and received, as these are times when God is present. When we share our experiences of God with others, we begin to anticipate and look forward to new ways God’s Spirit is working in and through us. That’s a blessing, for it gives us hope. It’s the way to a great life of faith. And it’s the way to truly know: **God loves you!**

Let us pray:

Lord, help me to be the person you want me to be today. Take away the desires that shouldn’t be there, and help me be single-minded in my focus and my pursuit of you. Help me to follow you and be transformed by your love so I may bless others with that same love. Bless us when we live generously, sharing your love with others. We commit ourselves to you in faith and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Genesis 12:1-4 (NRSV)

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

John 3:1-16 (NRSV)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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”