

## ***Love Makes a Way***

**John 12:20-33**

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Last week we talked about John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” This week is an extension of that theme. It explores just how far God will go in sharing that love.

You should know, God’s love didn’t start with the arrival of a young rabbi from Nazareth. Fifteen centuries before, God called a couple of aging folks—Abraham and Sarah—to have a baby. This was the start of God’s chosen people, Israel. God called them, not in the sense that they were God’s favorites, but rather so they could be part of a larger plan. In fact, God promised to love and bless the whole world through them.

Follow this story down through the ages and eventually you get to the ministry of Jesus. Throughout the Gospel of John, God’s love spreads to more and more people, and in the process, “God’s chosen people” gets larger, whether everyone is ready for that or not.

The fact of the matter is, there is perhaps no greater feeling in the world than to be chosen for something—a team, an assignment, a wedding engagement. It means that someone has seen you as a unique person, that someone desires to be on the same side as you, that someone believes you have a significant contribution to make.

On the other hand, there is no pain quite like the pain of not being chosen. A ten-year-old writes about life on the playground: “All my life I have been chosen last. That’s my problem...Why don’t they just hang a sign on me that says, ‘Reject. Last one to pick gets me.’”

So, friends, let me ask, when you were a child, did you tend to get chosen first or last or somewhere in-between? And did that choice ever affect how you viewed yourself? In a book called *The Whisper Test*, Mary Ann Bird describes the pain of her growing up years. She writes: “I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, a crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech.

“When schoolmates asked, ‘What happened to you?’ I’d tell them I’d fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me.

“There was, however, a teacher in the second grade whom we all adored - Mrs. Leonard. She was short, round, and happy—a sparkling lady.

“Annually we had a hearing test. Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something, and we would have to repeat it back—things like ‘*The sky is blue* or *Do you have new shoes?*’

I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said in her whisper, *I wish you were my little girl.*” Those seven words sounded like love to Mary Ann Bird. That love made all the difference in the world for her. She felt chosen in a way that she never had before.

During Lent at Good Shepherd, we’ve been exploring how love makes a difference for us, too. We’ve been reading thoughtful devotions written by members of the congregation. While I don’t have time to mention all of them, allow me to highlight a few.

In commenting on Jesus’ words, *I am the bread of life*, Pat Ojanen writes: “Bread does not mean food alone, but all things we require to live a fulfilling life.” In responding to *Jesus, the Good Shepherd*, Dynette Niebuhr says: “I believe that if we let love make the way by listening and watching and leading, we can all be good shepherds for others.” In focusing on *God so loved the world*, Bill Groskreutz writes: “Faith changes us to be more caring, more giving, and more forgiving. We can do this most everywhere we go—at home, at work, at school, and at church.”

Whether Jesus comes as the Bread of Life, the Good Shepherd, or the son God sent into the world, we can be sure that love is at the heart of his ministry. And if we take that a step further, being loved by Jesus gives us a feeling of being chosen by him.

John's Gospel stretches our thinking in this regard. In the chapter following John 3:16, Jesus meets up with a Samaritan woman. She's come to draw water at a well. In case you don't know, Samaritans were considered a mixed race—half-Jewish and half-something else. Self-respecting Jews avoided them like the plague. But not Jesus. Jesus strikes up a conversation with the woman. One thing leads to another, and eventually he chooses to spend a couple days in her village. When he's ready to leave, the villagers are so appreciative of Jesus that they call him "Savior."

In our reading for today, there are some Greeks who are every bit as curious about Jesus as those Samaritans. Passover is just around the corner. All sorts of people have come to Jerusalem. We're not sure who these Greeks are and why they've come. All we know for sure is that they're not Jewish; they're Gentiles. Evidently they've heard about Lazarus being raised from the dead. They want to meet the amazing miracle worker who made it happen.

As with the Samaritan woman, Jesus chooses to interact with them. In so many words, he's saying: "I'm here because of people like you. The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. It will be like a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying. If it dies, it will bear much fruit."

First Samaritans. Now Greeks. Jesus' world is getting bigger and bigger. Whether these groups know it or not, they desperately need the love he's offering. Jesus doesn't provide a quick fix for their problems, of course. *Turn your life over to me and everything will be fine.* Instead, he gives them a glimpse into the heart of God. They begin to see that God's primary work is not judgment; it's love.

A decade ago Pastor Rob Bell wrote a book called *Love Wins*. Maybe you've read it. The book sparked controversy. Bell's premise is that God plans to save the whole world through the power of Jesus' love. We can either accept or reject that love, says Bell, but God will keep looking for us. Bell claims that God's searching will continue until we are found—and this is where some of the controversy arises—that searching will continue in this life, and if need be, in the life of the world to come.

Bell makes the claim that hell is real, but he defines it more as a separation from God than an actual place of torment and fire. As separation from God, we might find ourselves there anytime we reject God's love for us. Bell writes: "Love is what God is, love is why Jesus came, and love is why he continues to come, year after year, to person after person. And in the end, love wins."

As I said, the book sparked controversy. The Southern Baptist Convention got so angry at Rob Bell that they passed a resolution to affirm the reality of hell as a place of eternal physical torment. That's right. It wasn't enough to view hell as separation from God. No, they had to make sure that everyone knew it was an actual place where unrepentant sinners would be tormented forever.

To be honest, there were parts of Rob Bell's book that stretched me too. But I'm closer to Rob Bell than I am to the Southern Baptist Convention. I believe God's primary work is love, not judgment. And God's desire is to save the whole world. Anytime we say no to God's love, we can end up in a hell of sorts, but it's more a separation from God than anything else. And even if we do say no, I find it hopeful to believe that God will keep coming to us until we are found.

Jesus says to the Greeks who come to him: "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." So, friends, what do you think: how many people are included in this love? Renowned evangelist Billy Graham was once interviewed by Newsweek. He was asked whether he believes that heaven will be open to Muslims, Hindus, and more. Graham answered humbly, "Those are decisions only the Lord will make. It would be foolish for me to speculate on who will be there and who won't." But then Graham added, "I believe the love of God is absolute. God said he gave his Son for the whole world, and I think God loves everybody, regardless of what label they have."

As I read the article, I appreciated Billy Graham's candor and his humility. In the end, we really don't know what God will do. But we can hold out hope that God's love is a lot wider and deeper than we can imagine. It's wide enough to include Jews, Samaritans, and Greeks; Lutherans and Catholics; Baptists and Evangelicals; Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims; and even the likes of you and me.

Friends, as Christians we believe that God reaches out to us—and to all humanity—through Jesus on the cross. God comes to choose us as God's own. A little like Mrs. Leonard, God whispers into our ears: *I wish you were my child.*

As one sent by God, Jesus offers light for our deepest darkness. Jesus promises to search for us until we are found. Indeed, because God so loves the world, we trust that the love we find in Jesus will make a way for us, even when there is no other way. Amen.