

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Love Reigns

Romans 3:21-26

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Romans 3:21-26 Common English Bible (CEB)

²¹ But now God's righteousness has been revealed apart from the Law, which is confirmed by the Law and the Prophets. ²² God's righteousness comes through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who have faith in him. There's no distinction. ²³ All have sinned and fall short of God's glory, ²⁴ but all are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ Through his faithfulness, God displayed Jesus as the place of sacrifice where mercy is found by means of his blood. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness in passing over sins that happened before, ²⁶ during the time of God's patient tolerance. He also did this to demonstrate that he is righteous in the present time, and to treat the one who has faith in Jesus as righteous.

I have a friend named Frank, and he has son named Justin. One time when Justin was younger they lived a very small apartment. One bedroom, a living room and a kitchen. Justin and Dad shared the bedroom at the time. Some family decided to move to town and they needed a place to stay for 1 night while they closed on their house.

The closing didn't go so well, and 1 night went to 1 week, went to 1 month and lasted a lot longer than Frank or Justin expected. During that time they had given up their bedroom to their family, and were sleeping on a sofa bed together. Things were tight, cramped and everyone was a little on edge.

Outside of their apartment complex, just beyond their sliding glass doors was a dirt pile. On that dirt pile Justin would

escape with the neighbor kids to play, he would escape the little place and cramped quarter and go enjoy himself.

Until one day, Justin came storming inside. "I am never going to play with my friends again." You could see the emotion of anger rolling off Justin, shoulders up around his ears, and body downward looking. No surprise he is frustrated, tempers were getting high in the cramped quarters. Frank himself was on edge.

Frank said, "What happened Justin?"

"Don't want to talk about!"

Frank's a good Dad, he knew Justin needed space in the cramped time, so he just let Justin go sit down and fume.

In the living space was Justin's cousin, Mikey. Mikey had been playing with some toy when Justin had come in. Because of the training of the cramped space it is doubtful he even noticed Justin come in, he hardly had looked up. Then a few minutes later, radio playing in the background one of those songs came on that just makes you start to tap your foot, it was one of those 80s dance songs that go you moving, and for Mikey you could see him emerge from where he was and his whole body started to sway, then he stood up and started dancing.

Having not even noticed Justin before, he looked at him and said, "Justin come dance!" At first you could tell Justin was just annoyed with Mikey, then slowly he considered the idea. It took a little longer and suddenly Justin was up dancing with Mikey. His whole body into the music.

Then the song ended and Justin looked like a new human. He turned to Mike and said, "Let's go play with my friends outside." Mikey agree and they began to run outside, Frank

stopped Justin and said, “I thought you were never going to play with them again.”

Justin responded, “Yeah, but then I danced and remembered you gotta live life.”

Today we continue our Faith By Number series. As we explore how we get some basic tools for living our faith, so we can work with God to create a masterpiece. Before I go farther want to remind folks of the story of Vincent Van Gogh. Many of us consider him a grand artist, the starry sky painting is stupendous. He was rejected his lifetime, only to have his paintings massed produced in our life time. Sometimes living the life God calls us to, is not about being loved by the world. It is a call to find love in the world and lean into it.

The last few weeks for this series we have been learning about the 3 general rules of the Methodist movement. First we learned about doing no harm, second about doing good, and today we learn the final rule of staying in love with God. We have learned these rules are rooted in Jesus’ rule of loving God and loving neighbor as our self. They are meant to be a set of lines to start painting alongside God in the masterpiece of this creation, painting a life of love modeled on the love of Christ.

Let’s get back to learning about our friend John. We have been hearing about him the past few weeks. When we left John last week, he had failed to marry his true love, failed at his new job, and with a warrant for his arrest had boarded a ship as a stowaway to head back to his home land. John considered himself a failure. If it was the 21st century John lived in they would have been posting videos of John on Facebook and marking them fail videos and memes(pictures with words around it) in the land he had just left.

He arrived back in home country and found a minister connected to the Moravian movement. You will remember that on the way to his new job, there had been a terrible storm in transit and everyone thought they were going to die, but the Moravian people sang, prayed and seemed at great peace. John had admired this group of German Christians ever since and we will hear more about them later.

The minister he met with discussed John's failure with him, and John said, "I have no faith, so I feel like I should leave preaching." To which his friend responded. "Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith."

Within the same time John found himself gathered with a group of Methodists, they were reading Luther's preface to the Romans. This was a document written by Martin Luther who began the Lutheran church. A document that was the result of Martin Luther one day sitting in the tower, which is code for in his day the monastery sat above a river and they went there to relieve themselves in the tower, things don't change much in history, and Martin Luther had inspiration. What if Romans was not talking about just believing in Christ, what if the faith of Christ, of being the key word, meant that God loved us first and loves us more than we can know. That it was not works we did that gained God's favor, but God's relationship was cosmic and with us from age to age.

John heard these words and his heart he said, "Was strangely warmed" in a time when life had felt lonely and cold. Again I will remind us, John is John Wesley the founder of the Methodist movement and writer of the three rules we are learning now.

The striking piece of this story is John would have drifted into oblivion if he had not re-engaged, and re-entered his relationship with God. He

followed the last simple rule to find a way to be a part of God's masterpiece. He stayed in love with God.

"When I was young I was sure of everything; in a few years, having been mistaken a thousand times, I was not half so sure of most things as I was before; at present, I am hardly sure of anything but what God has revealed to me." - John Wesley

Wesley is granting us permission to be unsure, to know we will be unsure at times, and then he tosses out this final rule to remind us that God's love, a relationship with the cosmic, and for us as Christians revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Christ is something available to us at any moment. We just need to reach out, and be embraced by it.

For anyone who has been in a long term relationship or has family/close friends of any kind or has maintained healthy long-term friendships, you know that maintaining the love in a relationship can be hard work. Healthy-long-term-living relationships take energy and practice.

If you meet couples or friends that stay in loving relationships and together for a long time I notice two traits about their relationship:

1. They tell stories about their connection to friends and to others. These stories may seem mundane, but if you look deeper you will see that they are sharing the good news about how this relationship makes them feel more whole.
2. They practice their love by regularly through taking time with one another, doing things they enjoy with each other, and by getting away from regular life to spend time together.

This is why Wesley gave us the first two rules first, because if people are free from harm and feel good, then they receive a relationship from God, they are free from the cares of this world and can know more the

loving relationship God is offering. And remember, these rules are hard...its hard to free people from harm...people live in harm and defend themselves from harm in any way they know how. They use old relationships to define new ones, they toss their pain on to us, and they choose not to dance because it has hurt to play with others in the past.

And when good is experienced they are even more free to connect with God, because it is a reminder God is doing Good in the world. It is why we work so hard as a church to express God's goodness through mission, relationships to the lonely in our visitation team, small group studies to grow your faith, space for young and old, rich and poor, accepted and rejected to experience good.

But both those are hard, because we are human...flawed....imperfect...incapable of being all places at all times...and ultimately we are beautiful messy loving beings designed in God's image trying to do our best in a messy creation that leans toward entropy and disconnection while God calls us to connection and relationship.

Poet William Blake says this about the experience of God's relationship:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour¹

Let me share with you another physical reminder of why Wesley believed an ongoing relationship with God was important.

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43650/auguries-of-innocence>

What is this?

1. It's a power strip. You plug this into the wall, and then you plug a lot of things into it

I have one of these in my living room, and it's got a lot of things plugged into it

- My TV
- My cable box
- My DVD player
- A big tall floor lamp

–The power strip takes power from the source, and it gives power to all those devices

A lot of things depend on that power strip

And like that power strip, a lot of things tend to depend on me:

-My family

-My aging parents

-This church and the people in it

-The staff

-The classes I teach

-The committees I work with

-The people I counsel with and minister to all through the week

They depend on me for leadership, guidance, connection, etc.

Like this power strip, a lot of things depend on me—

But UNLIKE the power strip, far too often, I do THIS:

[Plug the power strip into itself]

Instead of plugging into God's grace, a source that gives me the power to help people,

- I just plug into myself
- I try to do it all in my own power

I get up in the morning, and I say, "Oh man, I got so much to do — there's no time to pray"

- I rush from one commitment to the next thinking, "I gotta do this,
 - I gotta fix this,
 - I gotta make this happen."

I go through the day like this *[hold up power strip]*

On some days, I am what Craig Groeschel calls a Christian Atheist:

- I believe in God's love, as shown through Christ
- But I live as if God doesn't exist

Now the church through the years has engaged in a lot of shaming people because they neglect their relationship with God. It is why people are somewhat scared to go to church, they figure if I have let my

relationship with God atrophy then it might be too much to re-engage. Like not working a muscle it can seem it would be too hard to start again with God. And for some their first experience of God's grace might be too painful. It might seem like it did to Wesley during the failure in his life, or Justin's first experience on the dirt pile playing with friends that God must be like the world that has hurt me.

Here is the good news that Paul describes in Romans, the same message Wesley felt, and the same thing Justin experienced in dancing. God's love is dancing around us always, and it is our opportunity to turn to it. As Christians we are called to make it easier by doing no harm, and doing good. So the love that that is unending love and God's grace can envelop others, Grace is Agape love, the Greek word of unending love.

Relationships, good ones are hard to maintain, sometimes painful, but those that try again experience new life.

Here at Shiloh I have some specific requests of all of us in this work:

1. Start taking Sundays in worship to step back from this and embrace the relationship God is offering you. Too often we spend so much time trying to do the first two rules on Sunday or planning for it, we forget to accept this relationship here and now. Use worship for sabbath and not business. **Use it to plug into the right source.**
2. Pray....by withdrawing and considering next steps, be with God before you dive into each day.
3. Live in accountable relationships, talk directly to those you struggle with and trust that we accomplish very little by hurling hurt at each other.

We will fail and failure cannot be a bad thing. We will die in the eyes of the world through failing, the way to resurrection in this relationship work is with God and each other and trying again and again through all the pain we might still have.

It is the only way to find new life, is by trusting that it is possible through Grace and Love, grounded in a cosmic God who shares a deep relationship and is the source of connection and life.