

Sermon: God loves you, ridiculously

Scripture: Acts 8 (Ethiopian eunuch), 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

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It is good to be back with you. I was out of worship for the last two weeks because I was traveling with a group of high school students to Montreat, North Carolina, for a youth conference there. I bring you greetings from the 900 or so Presbyterian high school students from all over the country who were at the conference. I also bring you thanks from the five high school students, two adult leaders and myself, who you all helped afford Montreat with your prayers and your money. We'll have more information and pictures up on the youth bulletin board soon so you can see more of what this trip was about.

The theme of the conference was "Into These Waters," and each day we explored a different aspect of our faith, as it related to water. The first day focused on baptism. Now baptism is something that we Presbyterians tend to relegate to the very young. It is a time for the community to claim a new-born child as one of its own, and to rejoice at the new life in their midst. But by the time we have become adults, we tend to lose sight of our connection to baptism. I think that this changeover occurs when we make our profession of faith – either as a teenager in confirmation class, or as an adult in a new member's class. At that point, we begin to see ourselves as Christians, not because we were baptized as infants, but because we chose to confirm that baptism when we had reached an age where we were capable of making that choice. We are no longer Christians primarily because God chose us. We are now Christians primarily because we chose God.

Now there is something good about us taking a hold of our faith, and claiming it as our own. There is something good about realizing that being one of God's children means not just that God chooses us period, but that God chooses us for something. But the risk is that we will forget the truths of baptism when we claim the truths of confirmation.

And we can't do that, because we need the truth of baptism. You see, there is a powerful question at work in our world today. If you are like me, you ask this question several times a day. You ask it when you pick out your clothing and look in the mirror before going out the door in the morning. You ask it when you look at your pay check or when you don't get a paycheck. You ask it every time you get dumped by your girlfriend or boyfriend or your friend points out something you wish they wouldn't notice. The question is, "can I be loved?"

Now I know that this sounds like the tag line for the latest teen romance movie...but, I have never met someone who isn't asking the question. Men as well as women, rich and poor, every race, from infancy to old age. Those asking the question are voicing one of our most profound fears: that we will be rejected – that, in the end, we will be alone – that we won't be accepted or loved.

It is a fear based upon the belief that we have to do something to be loveable. This belief seems to be with us from our birth. But it is certainly helped along by others, who use it for their own purposes. How many times have people implied to you, or said outright to you that you will be

loved if only...if only you are good enough...or pretty enough...or obedient enough...or strong enough...or dedicated enough to the company...or disciplined enough. How many parents have inadvertently used their love as a way to get their children to behave themselves in the grocery check out line? How many teachers have used their love as a way to get their kids to line up straight on the way to gym class? How many boyfriends or girlfriends have “granted” their love to each other in order to get something from them? And this from the people who are supposed to care about us! What about the people who have no interest in us? How many advertisers have warned us of the dangers of not having the right dress...or car...or deodorant?

All our lives, we have been told that people will love us if we do something. So, it only makes sense that we would believe that God would make the same deal with us. God will love us...if. If we show up at 10 am on Sunday morning (9:30 or 11 during the school year). If we keep ourselves pure til we're married. (Whatever that means.) If we give enough money to the church. If we volunteer for vacation bible camp. If...if...if...

You see, even church folks can manage to lose sight of what it means to be loved. Because what it means to be loved is that you don't have to do anything to earn it – love is about a choice on the part of the one doing the loving – it is not about how loveable the beloved is – that's why we sometimes call it unconditional love...because it is without conditions. And yet we fear.

If it makes you feel any better, this fear is not a new fear. It goes all the way back to Biblical times. After Jesus ascended to heaven, his followers started trying to figure out how to live their lives in response to what they had seen and heard and learned from Jesus. The only record that we have of those early attempts is the book of Acts. And Acts is full of people struggling over whether they are good enough to be loved by God or not...and it is also full of people struggling over whether OTHER people are good enough to be loved by God or not.

Our reading for today came from the end of chapter eight. In it, Phillip meets up with a Eunuch from Ethiopia. After hearing about Jesus, the Eunuch's question is, “What prevents me from being baptized?” He asks this question assuming that there is something which prevents him from being baptized. “What do I need to fix about myself before God will welcome me? What do I need to get rid of in myself in order to be loved by God?” And Phillip's answer is: “nothing.” Because God loves people no matter what has happened to their bodies. Phillip knew something about God's love.

But not every early follower of Jesus had as good a handle on God's unconditional love as Phillip did. In Acts 9, we have the story about Saul's conversion. In it, a messenger of God appears to Ananias, and tells him to go help Saul because God has chosen Saul. Ananias responds: “I don't think you know who Saul is. Let me fill you in – he kills people. Not just any people – he kills my people – he kills YOUR people. And now you want to forgive him and welcome him and love him? I don't think that is a great plan.” But God responds: “It's not your plan. It's MY plan – because I love people no matter what they have done.”

And that is not even mentioning Acts eight where we hear about Simon the sorcerer, who thinks that he can give God enough money to earn the power to grant the Holy Spirit to people. Or

Acts ten, where Peter learns that even Roman Centurions can be loved by God. You starting to see a pattern here?

The world out there tells you that if you want to be loved, you have to do something...you have to be someone...somehow different from how you are – you have to cover up who you are, in order to find love. And that, my friends, it a lie. The world tells you that you have to do things to earn love. But we are told something different. And we are told it right there, at this font – where just a few minutes ago, we baptized Sarah Elizabeth, a child of the covenant. God did not start loving her when we baptized her – God had been loving her much longer than that. And God certainly did not start loving you when you professed your faith in God...or when you turned your life around...or when you came back to church or started living the right way or any of those things. And you know something else, if you undid all those things you have done – God would not stop loving you.

We need to hold on to that. We need to remind each other of that. Because there is a whole world out there that is happy to have us continue to believe that we have to do things to earn love, because then they can sell us what they have to sell. So anytime you hear those voices and you begin to believe them, you remember this font. You remember that you too are loved by God. You two are a child of the covenant. And there's nothing that is going to change that. Amen.