

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: July 23, 2023, Pride/RIC Sunday

Text: 1 John 4:7-12 and Romans 8:31-35, 37-39

Title: What Do You Need to Hear?

Focus: What do LGBTQ+ folks and allies need to hear? What do *any* of us need to hear? “You are a beloved child of God. May you know God’s love for you and serve God with joy.”

First Reading: 1 John 4:7-12 God is Love

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent God’s only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent God’s Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God’s love is perfected in us.

Second Reading: Romans 8:31-39 God’s Love in Christ Jesus

³¹What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.* ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What’s Your View of God—Harsh or Gracious?

- What’s your view of God or how do you picture God?
 - That’s quite a direct question to start a sermon, don’t you think?
- For instance, is God fundamentally harsh and rigid or gracious and loving?
- How would you describe God’s essential characteristics?

I received some feedback about last week’s sermon on the Parable of the Sower that prompted this question. One of the contrasts I developed in last week’s sermon called “What about the Sower?” was a differentiation between the ways we may have heard that parable told or emphasized in a sermon or a classroom Bible study setting.

I expressed one side of that contrast through the story I told of Lutheran church leader and professor Cory Driver recalling how he experienced this parable in his youth group in the church in which he grew up. He said,

“I remember this parable being trotted out as a fear tactic.”¹

I grew up charismatic [denominational setting] with youth group leaders who wanted us to make high-pressure decisions to “get saved.” This passage was specifically used to influence us to make sure that we weren’t stuck on the path or tangled up in the rocks or the weeds and, therefore, going to hell.²

That kind of interpretation or emphasis on the story gives a particular picture of God that, in turn, affects how we think of ourselves. If we see God as fundamentally harsh and demanding, then we’re likely to be on edge with anxiety that we’re not good enough.

For the other side of the contrast, I pointed out last week that before we even get to the soil in the story, we see a sower who widely scatters seed—so generously that we could even picture this person as wasteful or reckless. But seeing the sower widely scattering seed helps us to see God as one who is gracious and generous, who scatters seed, love, and grace broadly and wants to see them grow.

So, two different pictures of God could emerge from this parable of the sower based on how a preacher, teacher, or reader interprets, emphasizes, or hears the story.

- Is the story told in such a way that we are anxious about the response we make—because we’re worried about being in good soil--and so we get the picture of a God who is eager to punish us if we’re not good enough?
- Or, do we recognize God as the Sower who generously scatters seed; who provides wind and rain and sunshine; who, as Cory Driver said in his comments on Terrace Farming, ‘gets seeds where they need to go’ and who tends to seeds and crops and people so that they may grow and flourish?
- To be blunt, is God harsh and eager to punish or gracious and loving?

Part of the feedback I received last week was from a church member who told me a story about a family friend whose first encounter with a Christian church came during high school with regular visits to a friend’s church at which he consistently heard the message that he wasn’t good enough. This was both the general feeling that he got from repeated visits there as well as a direct, explicit message. He was even told by his friend, **“I don’t think you love Jesus as much as we do.”**

¹ Cory Driver, “Moving Forward: Seed and Sower: Along for the Ride,” a video reflection posted for July 16, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_cehiu_mHo

² Cory Driver, Lectionary Blog: , “Seed and Sower: Let Go!” Posted July 10, 2023, at *Living Lutheran*. <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2023/07/lectionary-blog-seed-and-sower-let-go/>

Thinking about her family friend, this church member wondered how he would have heard last week's sermon recognizing the grace of God and how that would have impacted his first images of God which came from the church of his high school friend.

And this church member also wondered, "If someone had only heard of or pictured the God of grace that we express at Good Shepherd, and hadn't experienced the harshness or judgement that can come from a picture of a demanding God, would they appreciate how amazing that grace is or would they be sort of indifferent about it, as though they just didn't get how remarkable that is?"

How Do You Picture God on Pride Sunday?

This reflection on "How do you picture God?" or "What are the primary characteristics of God?" comes into play as we mark Pride Sunday today.

I want to ask you the question I posed first to myself as preacher and then to the Tuesday Bible Study group. It's also reflected in today's sermon title.

- As I first sat down to think about the theme for today's sermon, the question I asked myself was **"What does an LGBTQ+ person need to hear?"**

I meant that most specifically in terms of hearing a word of Scripture and in the theme of the day's sermon. But the setting could also be any meaningful conversation between a family member or friend with one who is LGBTQ+.

And I quickly answered myself: "What does an LGBTQ+ person need to hear? Just the same that any of us need to hear."

And then I thought of the blessing I offer when people in worship at Good Shepherd come forward for Communion and, with their arms across their chest, ask for a blessing. The blessing I offer is something like this:

- **"Name, you are a beloved child of God. May you know God's love for you and serve God with joy."**

This blessing rests upon the way that we answer that first question about who God is or how we picture God.

My own answer and the response we hear from today's scripture readings is **God is love.**

- Who is God? (Or, as expressed in our opening question), "What's your view of God?" or "How do you picture God?"
 - **God is love.**
- This blessing is multifaceted. It is . . .
 - **A declaration or affirmation of faith about God:** "God is love."

- **An affirmation of the person. Their identity is shaped by that connection to God**—“You are a beloved child of God.”
- There is something about being named or being called by name. It is a signal of belonging or of intimacy.
- **It is a blessing** in that it is a reminder of the goodness and love of God and of God’s love for you.
- It also includes what’s called a **“charge” or an encouragement to live in a certain way.**
 - “May you serve God with joy.”

This “Serve God with joy” charge is a counterpart to the anxiety of worrying if we’re good enough. God in grace welcomes us all and offers love and grace in the way we described the wide scattering of seed last week.

We respond to God, not out of fear or anxiety or a pressure to strive to earn something, but as a joyful response to the goodness of God and the welcome we have received.

I hear this motivation or rationale expressed in the reading from First John:

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God . . . ⁹God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent God’s only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent God’s Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Love originates from God. Our experience of the love of God—which is tangibly demonstrated in the coming of Jesus—enables or encourages us to live in response to that love. That’s what John expresses in v. 11:

¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. . .

If we recognize the love and grace of God and have heard and know this good news, then that is good news we want to tell others.

Do We Recognize the Distinctiveness of this Good News of Grace?

Remember how I said how the church member who told me about her family friend had repeatedly heard, “You’re not good enough” from the church he visited with his high school friend? *And* how this church member *a/so* wondered if a person who has only heard of and known a God of grace may not recognize how remarkable that is to be welcomed and loved by that kind of God or that consistent message?

You should be aware that this good news of God’s love and welcome which we know in Jesus and which we seek to make known is distinct. You will not hear this joyful declaration from all Christian churches. Just to be clear. . .

- **Not all people or all Christians or all churches are going to answer this question—“How do you picture God?” in the same way.**

I had a conversation just last week with a person connected to Good Shepherd who described feeling uncomfortable with the message of welcome and inclusion he has heard from Good Shepherd. We met in my office for about an hour and 20 minutes.

- He pointed to the artist's picture on the front cover of the “Christmas in July” *What's Happening* bulletin: “Who is that?”
 - “That's baby Jesus,” I told him.
 - And we talked about how there's no way of knowing for sure what Jesus looked like, and yet he was born into a Jewish family in the first century in the Roman-occupied province of Judea. It's likely that he had brown eyes, dark brown to black hair and olive-brown skin. Jesus was not blonde-haired and blue-eyed with fair skin, as you sometimes see him depicted.
- “Why do you have that?” he asked, pointing to the *Reconciling in Christ* logo which is a central cross surrounded by concentric heart-shapes in rainbow colors and different skin-tone colors.
- He was irritated by the personal pronouns in the signature line of the email he received from me. “Why do you have to push that?”

We talked about Good Shepherd's Welcome Statement. I described how that statement—along with how it is authentically lived out--is deeply ingrained in the culture of the church.

He said, “Why can't we just say ‘all’ and have it mean *all*?”

This sounds very much like one of the questions posed on the *Reconciling Works* website (or on one of the information sheets you'll find in our Welcome Space): “We're already welcoming, why do we need to say so?”

- One of the responses on the website plainly says that . . . **“Even churches who declare “All are welcome” often demonstrate to LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC individuals and families that “All” does not include them.”**
 - BIPOC is Black, Indigenous, People of Color

The point of the *Reconciling Works* website is that a church's self-reflective creation of a Welcome Statement is an explicit message which demonstrates an intentional commitment to work towards full welcome and inclusion.

This person said that when he was last in worship at Good Shepherd, he did not recognize as many people as he expected he would or he did not see many whom he had been accustomed to seeing in the past. The implication was that there were others like him who had previously been active at the church and who were similarly disenchanted with the direction of the church and this message of welcome and inclusion which caused him to feel *unwelcome*.

I replied by talking about COVID as a great disrupter across society, which has markedly changed how people function and relate in schools, businesses, and in the church—in every segment of society. The Church is different and we are different in so many areas of our lives. Our patterns and habits are different. My recognition of COVID as the primary factor affecting who is in church was a response to his allusion that it must be because others are also upset like he is about the Welcome Statement and how we live that out.

I affirmed the central place that Good Shepherd's Welcome Statement has in the life of the church. I don't know if it was persuasive to him, but I told him about how frequently I/we hear from new worshipers and new members, "That's why I'm here" and they point to the Welcome Statement. I briefly mentioned that to him, but here are their direct, written reasons: *Excerpts from the reflections of New Members from March 2023.*

- I was attracted to Good Shepherd by its welcoming and inclusive approach.
- We are becoming members because 1) We really embrace the Welcome Statement. 2) All are welcome at the table.
- We chose LCGS because it is a RIC community and because we felt so warmly welcomed and included on our first visit by both the pastor and staff and other congregants.
- We were attracted to Good Shepherd because of the love and inclusivity that pours out of this church.
- I am blessed to have found such a welcoming church!
- [We] visited many Reno churches, but Good Shepherd attracted us because of its warm welcome, diverse membership, good preaching, music and social ministry outreach.
- We love the inclusive nature of Good Shepherd, and that's why we are here.
- We were attracted to Good Shepherd for its welcoming members [and] its strong commitment to community outreach.

What Do You Need to Hear?

What do LGBTQ+ folks need to hear? What do *any* of us need to hear? What is the good news we have to share?

Drawing from today's scriptures and our ongoing way of living out our Welcome Statement:

- God is love. Let us love one another, for love is from God. (1 John)
- The Apostle Paul affirms in Romans that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- "You are a beloved child of God. May you know God's love for you and serve God with joy."

Thanks be to God for this Good News of grace that we have to share. Amen.