

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH – Scripture & Sermon
Sunday July 31, 2022 | 8th Sunday after Pentecost

WORSHIP FOCUS: “Steadfastness”

Moral is a state of mind. It is steadfastness and courage and hope. ~*Louis L Mann*

1st Lesson: Psalm 107, 1-9, 43 (From Voices United)

O give thanks, for God is gracious;
God’s steadfast love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of God say so,
Those redeemed from trouble,
Whom God gathered in from the lands
From the east and the west.
From the north and the south.
Some lost their way in desert wastes,
Finding no place to settle;
Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted with them.
Then they cried to you, God, in their trouble;
You rescued them from their distress.
You led them by a straight path,
Till they reached a place to settle.
Let them thank you, O God, for your steadfast love,
For the wonders you do for us.
For you satisfy the thirsty,
And fill the hungry with good things.
Whoever is wise, ponder these things.
Consider God’s unfailing love.

2nd LESSON: Hosea 11:1-11 (NRSV)

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.

They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes.

My people are bent on turning away from me.

To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

They shall go after the LORD, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD.

SERMON: "Loving God, Loving Ephraim, Loving Ourselves"

There are times in our lives as Christians when we struggle. Sometimes we struggle with questions about who God is, and who Jesus is. Sometimes we struggle with intellectual and scientific and theological concepts. And yet, although these are the struggles that we are perhaps most easily persuaded to discuss, it is not these things that truly disturb us. The struggles that believers find the most difficult are the struggles that involve those three deeply human and divine gifts of God – struggles of faith, struggles of hope, and struggles of love. And, of these struggles – just as love is the greatest gift – love is perhaps the greatest struggle for us.

This week, in talking with many of you, this very personal struggle – the struggle to love - has come up repeatedly in conversations. A few of you have talked about how difficult it is to continue to love someone with whom you are disappointed. Some of you have mentioned sons and daughters who are difficult. Some of you have mentioned loved ones who are not trustworthy. Some of you have mentioned structures in the wider church that you love, which you are experiencing as broken, terrifying, argumentative and uncomfortable. Over and over again I hear you talk about the world – this great big beautiful world that we are called to love – and then – in thinking about all the troubles and trials and tribulations we are facing, confide in me that you are so heartbroken, that the love and the hope and the faith that you need to keep in the future are becoming increasingly difficult.

All of you know what you should do. All of you want to do it. All of you want to love. All of you want to love extravagantly and outrageously. All of you want to embody the grace of Christ – be vessels of the freely given love of God. But, many of you are feeling a little low on energy. The fuel is running out. You are exhausted. And when I say many of you, I guess I should say instead, many of us, because your minister is one of these people.

It has been a very interesting experience to listen to people tell me how difficult it is to be the love that they know they are called to embody, and to seek to support and offer words of encouragement, when I am finding myself in much the same predicament. Some of the work that I am engaged in as President of the Region, and as a Commissioner to General Council, has involved situations in which being steadfast in my love for the church has been very difficult.

When love is hard, and we are tempted to turn away from love, the spiritual problem is not just felt in the beloved whom we turn away from. Indeed, the greater problem and struggle may very well be in us. Behind your heartfelt confessions this week, I have heard you struggling with yourselves. And I know I am struggling with myself.

Who are we, if as a parent we struggle to love a child? Who are we, as Christians, if we struggle to love the church? Who are we, as members of civil society, if we struggle to love so many hateful parts of the body politic? Who are we, if we are unable to love? What does it mean about us, if we can't love? Does it mean that we are failures? Does it mean that we are not following Jesus? Does it mean that we are no longer the embodiment of God's image?

Certainly, it is these kinds of questions, and their silent accusation, shifting in the background of our souls, that I have been most aware of this week. When we struggle to love others, we struggle to love ourselves. And that is, perhaps even more difficult.

And, when we reach this crisis, we risk becoming a little like the people the Psalmist writes about: "Some lost their way in desert wastes, finding no place to settle; Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted with them." Our souls faint. Our souls faint.

This terrible moment is often exacerbated by the belief that the answer to our spiritual crisis is as easy as the Psalmist makes it seem: “Then they cried to you, God, in their trouble; you rescued them from their distress. You led them by a straight path, Till they reached a place to settle.”

We think that as a result of what is supposed to happen, that we, as a result shall be restored, and be able to give thanks to God for God’s steadfast love, and for the wonders that God does for us. Because when our soul faints, God wakes us, and satisfies our thirst and fills our hunger with good things.

And yet, it is a little bit more complicated than that. The Psalmists are always seeking to remind us that God is good, and to lift up our God. Sometimes it seems that all one has to do is ask, and the solution will be given. What the Psalms do not do such a good job of showing is the pain and the patience the chosen people had to endure in order to be saved by God. The truth is that the healing and the restoration we seek, is not a magician’s trick – not an instantaneous reversal – but something much more nuanced. The healing we seek is itself a struggle. The love we seek to embody is not cheap grace. It is costly, and difficult, and time consuming, always fragile and uncertain. But, just because it is difficult, does not mean that we are failures.

It actually means that we are a little bit more like the real Jesus of history whose struggle to love took him to the cross. Or, like the vision of God we meet in Hosea, in our reading today.

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.”

God continues to love, in spite of disappointment, in spite of her children’s imperfections. God’s love, for God, even for God, is itself a struggle.

“Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.”

Can you sense God’s pain, at the way that God’s costly love went unacknowledged and unappreciated for so long?

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

God continues to love, because love is who God is. God can no more stop loving, than stop being, and yet, God’s love – God’s whole being – is heartbroken.

God’s unfailing love endures forever. But it is not an easy love. The love that we are called to embody, the loving face of God that we are urged to look for reflecting God’s love for us onto all of Creation, is not something blithe and simple and gay and superficial. It is costly. It hurts sometimes. It breaks our hearts. And yet, we seek to be steadfast in spite of everything. Love, as it is for God, is part of who we are.

This reading from Hosea is an extremely poetic one. The figure of Ephraim is many things. Ephraim is the son of Jacob, born to an Egyptian woman, while Israel in Egypt. He is a son – a being who God has a personal relationship with – who in many ways is difficult to love, since his mother was one of those who enslaved the chosen people and came from a culture who did not know God. And yet God loves him.

Ephraim is also a tribe. The twelve sons of Jacob all become the leaders of the different tribes that become the nation of Israel, so Ephraim is also many, the community – Facebook creepers, the false news tellers, the paranoid conspiracy theorists, the corporations and the governments and the institutions – that we struggle with.

And Ephraim is also a word. A Hebrew word that embodies a paradox. Ephraim means harvest. And, it also means exhaustion, depletions and scarcity. Ephraim is the idea that in order to plant and bear fruit, and receive a blessing, there is always a cost, and that for the fruit to ripen, a whole lot of work needs to take place – and, at the end, for the fruit to be produced, something has to die.

Ephraim reminds us of the cost of all grace. That love is costly to God. And because that is the nature of love, it should not surprise us to discover that love is also costly to us.

Love is not cheap. It is not easy. It is expensive. It is rare. And it will not always be abundant. The fragrant oil that we need to burn to be love, will sometimes flicker or burn out.

But that does not mean that we are failures. That does not mean that we are not following Christ properly. Indeed, it may very well mean the opposite – that we are coming to understand what real love is, how important it is, how precious, how fragile, and because of all this – how truly powerful it can be.

As you struggle to love -- as you struggle to love the God of love, don't forget to love yourselves too. And as you struggle, know that God and Jesus struggle along with you. That it is in the constant struggle to love, in which any possibility of steadfastness is to be found. Steadfast love, like God's steadfast love which endures forever, is itself an eternal struggle. Thanks be to God.