“Loving Life: Find Joy”

Lenten Sermon Series Week 1

Matthew 5:1-10 Kimby Young

1 Thessalonians 5:9-18  February 18, 2018

The season of Lent has begun. It is a traditional season of 40 days plus Sundays when Christians try to prepare for celebration of the resurrection at Easter. The funny thing is as Lent has developed thru the years, there is very little that is celebratory about the way we observe Lent. Lent began as a season for converts to learn about the faith and to prepare to be baptized. Eventually it broadened into all Christians and became a time to work on your faith and to be more intentional and even more intense about your faithfulness. In the Roman Catholic tradition it became a time to “give up something” in order to think about sacrifice and our devotion to God. In the protestant tradition we have often added something – like extra Bible study or prayer or personal discipline of some kind. During worship we are often more serious during Lent, taking on the difficult issues of our faith and of our daily life. Quite honestly, Lent can be a dark and a difficult time.

But this year, Lent started on Valentines’ Day. So right away, our observance of Lent took on a different flavor. This year Lent started with a day of love – a day for thinking about all the people we love, all the ways we love, even all the ways God loves us. And right away for me, a theme was born.

I remember a movie from several years ago called “Chocolat”. The movie stars Johnnie Depp and Juliette Binoche and is set in France in the late 1950s. I am not necessarily recommending the movie because it is not family friendly – but I always think of the movie around Lent. The plot is that a young single mother opens a chocolate shop during Lent in a very rigid little town ruled my strict morality and discipline. Meanwhile the mayor of the town is a strong moralistic church leader who thinks it is holy and pious to be very rigid and self-disciplined – to prove how faithful you are by how strictly you observe a discipline. So he is very rigid in his fasting and he believes you should never indulge in the pleasures of life. And what is this new chocolate shop but a den of pleasure and indulgence? Immediately there is this rivalry between the two and the question arises – what does God really expect of us? Or demand of us? How does God want us to live? When should we feel guilty? Or not? What is temptation? How can we best show our faithfulness? How can we really serve God?

Well, I won’t tell you the end of the story, but as is only right “chocolate” wins. Theologically, I absolutely agree with that outlook. Chocolate wins. God does not want us to deprive ourselves or demand that others obey strict rules and regulations. God wants us to enjoy life, to appreciate beauty and joy and friendship and yes, even chocolate. God wants us to be happy and to look for positive moments. God wants us to help others to be blessed or comforted or cared for or appreciated or understood or encouraged. God wants us to know life is good. God wants us to feel positive about life. God wants us to love life. Yes, sometimes moderation is called for. Over indulgence is not a good thing. Sometimes we have to watch out or be careful. But enjoying a moment, receiving the good gifts all around us, seeing God in those beautiful blessings of the day, even the little tiny blessings. This is holy. This is good. God wants us to enjoy life, to love life, to live that life fully and lovingly, and to help others find that joy – that blessing, that goodness, that grace of God.

There are countless stories in scripture about Jesus enjoying life – loving life and finding joy. He is criticized by the Pharisees for eating with sinners and celebrating at feasts – for not fasting or observing Sabbath rituals. Several of his parables are really very funny – a camel pushing thru the eye of a needle. And several of his conversations have humor that we seem to try to overlook – bantering back and forth with people. Even Jesus’ first miracle was at a party – turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana so that people could celebrate and enjoy. We do a disservice to Jesus to think of him only as serious and stern and meek and mild. One of my favorite pictures of Jesus is of Jesus laughing. Google it when you get home – look up images of Jesus laughing – they are wonderful. That’s the joy of the Lord. And God calls us to that kind of absolute joyous abandon in God’s presence. God wants us to love life. God wants us to find joy. God wants us to create that joy and love for others.

So this season, we will be unpacking the theme of Loving Life. What makes life worth living for you? What makes life beautiful? What brings meaning to life? Of course it’s not all about happiness and good times. And it’s not all about you and how you feel. The meaning of life goes deeper and includes dealing with difficult times. Our purpose in life includes care for others and helping others to find that joy as well. Loving life is about putting all of life in perspective, finding that right balance, centering our life in God’s love. Because God’s love is really what it’s all about – life’s meaning, life’s purpose, life’s center.

The reading from Thessalonians is filled with good advice for the good Christian. And a lot of it we have heard so many times we just think – yeah, yeah of course. Encourage one another. Build each other up. Live in peace. Stand with the discouraged. Support the weak. Be patient with everyone. Yeah, yeah, we’ve heard it before. But then, verse 16. Rejoice always, give thanks in all circumstances – as one translation says it - count it all joy. What does that mean?

Find joy in every situation. Find joy every single day. Find joy even when, let’s face it, things are not looking good. What does that mean? This scripture passage wasn’t written to innocent naïve people living an easy good life. This scripture was written to people who were being persecuted for their faith, who were being ridiculed for following Jesus, who were being abused and punished – financially, emotionally, socially, culturally, verbally, physically – abused for believing in Jesus and trying to serve God. “Rejoice always, give thanks in all circumstances, count it all joy.” To love life, to find joy – doesn’t mean that you don’t understand life or that everything is easy. It means you put everything in God’s hands – the good, the bad, the ugly, the easy – you put everything in God’s hands, you trust God, and you receive whatever gifts God will give back to you. You receive every day as a gift from God and you make it the best that it can be. And that best doesn’t mean just for you – that best means - make it the best day for everyone around you, for everyone you touch, as far as your world can reach. “Rejoice always, give thanks in all circumstances, count it all joy.” God wants you to find joy. God wants you to help others find joy. God wants you to be happy. God wants what is best for you. God wants you to be blessed. And God wants this for everyone. Those who are poor, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst, those who need mercy, those who crave peace. Blessed are they. God wants for us blessing. God wants for us joy. God wants us to love and to love life.

Here’s your challenge for the week ahead – for the season ahead. Look for love. Look for signs of God’s love – for they are there, all around you. Look for moments, for revelations, for touches from God. A friend of mine calls them “winks”. Look for ways God is winking at you and showing you love. You will see these glimpses of God’s grace everywhere – in a sunset, in a raindrop, in a child’s laugh, in a friend’s contact, in a stranger’s word. See God wherever you go. See God’s presence and God’s love for you. Hear God’s call and God’s challenge for you. That same friend who talks about “winks” from God calls these “nudges” – the way God nudges you to do something, to help someone, to speak up, to do good. Look for ways that you can show God’s love to someone else. For these moments are all around you as well – moments when you can show love, point to grace, offer peace to someone who needs it. Look for ways to bring joy into the world. Find ways this week to bring God’s joy into someone else’s life. As many ways as possible and as much joy as possible. And in so doing you will find God’s gift for you as well. In showing God’s love you will find joy – the gift of God’s grace.