



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

October 25, 2015

"Love That Can Be Seen" (The Vine Series) - John 15:9

The Rev. Tim Shaw

John 15:9 - *"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love."* John 15:9 is an astonishingly rich, potentially life-transforming and extremely disruptive verse of scripture. It's amazing that so much can be packed into so few words. Think about it. Jesus says to his disciples, Jesus says to us, "As God the Father has loved Him, so He has loved us. As God the Father has loved Him, so He has loved us."

Let's stop and think about that for a moment. Even the most modest appreciation of what Jesus is saying here should explode our hearts with gratitude that we have a God who is like the One revealed to the world in Jesus Christ. God the Father loves God the Son with a love that is beyond measuring. The intensity of that love between the Father, Son and Spirit have for one another is so intense, the Triune God is described as love itself.

Listen again to what John says in John 15:9, "As God the Father has loved Him, so He has loved us." God the Son loves us with a love that is just as great, just as intense and unchanging as the love Jesus experienced from God the Father. That is incredible. It is that love that can begin to heal and transform us. Jesus then goes on to say in the last half of John 15:9, *"Abide in my love."* Jesus wants us to abide, He wants us to make our

home in his love. That's where he wants us to live our lives. He wants our lives immersed in that love. The love we see in the homecoming of the Prodigal Son is that kind of love. It's a love that waits, that watches, that runs to embrace us when we turn towards home. It's a love that forgives and blesses. It's a love that encourages and enables us to begin again. It is with a love like that, that Jesus loves us with. And He wants us to rest in that love.

In 1988 an earthquake shook Armenia and in a matter of minutes 30,000 people were dead. After the shaking stopped a father ran to an elementary school to look for his young son. What greeted him was just a mound of rubble. His boy was somewhere underneath the debris. He figured out the location of where his son's classroom once stood and he began, with his bare hands, to pull the stones off the pile. Piece by piece, he lifted the debris. As he did, he remembered a promise he had made to his son. "No matter what happens, I will always be there for you." That's what he had told his son. Eight hours of digging turned into 16, then 32 and then 36. In the thirty-eighth hour this father lifted a stone and heard his son's voice. He called to his boy, "Arman! Arman!" And the voice answered, "Dad, it's me."

After his rescue the boy said that

he told the other kids who were trapped underneath the collapsed school, not to worry. "I told them that if you were alive you would save me and when you saved me, they'd be saved too. I knew that you would keep your promise. "No matter what happens, I will always be there for you."

That's the kind of love our God has for us and he has proven that by what he did in coming to the world in Jesus Christ. Even when life is falling apart, when hope seems shattered, when our dreams have died, God says I love you with a love like this. I've come to get you. I've come to pull the rubble of failed relationships and broken dreams off of us and rescue us from the destruction that the earthquakes in our lives have caused.

Isn't that incredible? It's hard for many of us to trust that's true. There is so much pain and brokenness in many of our lives. Many of us have so many experiences of broken promises in our human relationships that we don't know how to abide, how to rest, how to entrust ourselves to Jesus Christ—this One who has this burning, passionate, unchanging, unshakeable love for us.

We need His love for us to heal us so that we might begin to rest more completely in His love.

There are a lot of things in our lives that can make it difficult for us to trust God's grace. That's what Jesus is offering us...His free, unearned grace. All of us have this nagging, life-sapping sense inside of us that says we have to do something to earn God's love. It's hard for us to accept that it is just a matter of accepting God's grace through faith. We want to do something to earn it. It takes humility to admit there is nothing we can do to make ourselves more acceptable to God.

A good friend of mine tells a story, that I've shared her already, about a trip we took to Hawaii from California a long time ago. I have told this story but I'd like you to hear how my friend Steve tells it. He's used it in a lot of sermons. He even told it one time when I was sitting in the sanctuary at his church. It's a great story but it comes at my expense.

Here's what he said: "My family and I and a good friend of ours went to Hawaii for vacation. And as usual, we were running a bit late in getting to the airport. Our friend is the type who gets to the airport two hours before the flight, so our running late was getting him a little nervous. I just kept telling him "Tim, relax, it's only seven minutes from our front door to the United terminal." They lived close to San Francisco International Airport.

"Well, we ended up being more than just a few minutes late. It ended up we were so late that United gave our seats away to other customers—something about the flight being very full. Steve says, "You can imagine my friend was not very happy at this point. But the agent at the gate said, "Well, hold on for a second, let's see if we can work something out."

"A few minutes later she came back with some great news: 'Mr. Schibsted, we have some room in business class, so we'll move you up free of charge. Would that be okay with you?' Steve said, 'I did everything I could to be gracious to my friend!'

"Now, you have to understand something to really appreciate this whole scene. We are an economy class flying family. We never fly anything but economy, so this was a whole new world for us. Flying to Hawaii is always a great experience. Have you ever noticed that? Everybody is going on vacation so everybody is happy, the customers are happy, the flight attendants are happy—everybody's happy. But flying in business class—it's another world.

"There was all kinds of room. You can actually get comfortable. And they gave us seats right in front of the movie screen so there was this big area for our son Drew to play. The flight attendant addressed me as Mr. Schibsted and actually pronounced my name correctly.

"And it just got better. Before dinner drinks, after dinner drinks. Real silverware and tablecloths with dinner. Filet Mignon. Warm towels to clean your hands. Great movie. As I was sitting there I thought: this is just like God's grace. I did nothing to deserve this. In fact, I made a huge mistake, I sinned, and yet they are treating me like I had personally paid to be in business class. I wanted to tell the flight attendant "You don't understand—I'm not supposed to be up here. The only reason I'm here is because I was so late getting to the airport."

That's just like grace. It's absolutely free. Grace is a gift. It's God's unmerited favor. It's

something like United Airlines upgrading a customer who did nothing to deserve it. In fact, we made lots of mistakes. We didn't deserve it. And yet there we were. A free upgrade to Hawaii. That's just like God's love toward us. There is nothing we can do to earn it.

Steve, concludes his little sermon illustration by saying, "And you know, because I didn't deserve it, it was even more pleasurable, more fun. I totally enjoyed it. Not only that, I had a great deal of fun telling my friend that this is exactly how I planned it, it was just pure joy."

Jesus tells us, "As the Father has loved Him, so He has loved us. Abide, rest, relax, trust His love."

We could stop right there. We should just stop and consider the impact of what Jesus is telling us. He wants us to trust His love. But what he also means, as will be crystal clear in the verses that follow John 15:9, we are called to show God's love to others.

To abide in God's love means living our lives in the state of being loved. And abiding in God's love means making that love a reality to others in our lives. God's incredible love for us needs to become visible to the world.

This morning I want to focus on making the love of Christ visible to others. And to do that I need to back up the story of the Bible all the way to the story of Moses and then take you on a sweeping tour of the story of scripture.

Making His love visible to the world has been something that has been on the heart of God from the beginning.

The second book of the Bible, the book of Exodus is the book where the Bible's central story really begins—the story of redemption—and that story begins with the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

Egypt was the world's superpower at the time, ruled by the Pharaoh. He controlled the Israelites by enslaving them. The Israelites worked everyday, making bricks to build storehouses for Pharaoh. Egypt was an empire, largely built on the backs of the slave labor of the Israelites.

God sees the way that the Egyptians are oppressing them. He hears them crying out for his help. The Hebrew word for cry is "tsa'aq". "Tsa'aq" is a word that is used throughout the Hebrew Bible. It's a word that captures the pain that the people felt. It's almost equivalent to our word "ouch". It's what people cry when they're hurting.

But "tsa'aq" is not just a cry it's a question. "Tsa'aq" is what the blood of Abel does from the ground after he is killed by his jealous brother Cain. "Tsa'aq" is a question that cries out for an answer. "Where is justice?" "Did anybody see what is happening here?" "Did you hear what they said?" "Who will come and help us or are we on our own down here?"

When the people of Israel cried out for help, God heard them. Our God is a God who hears that cry. Our God is a God who always hears the cries of the oppressed. If we want to understand the core of who our God is then we have to come to see that our God is a God who always hears the "tsa'aq" of the oppressed. But our God doesn't just hear these cries, He responds; He acts.

Most of us know something of what it is like to come to the end of our rope. We know what it's like when we have no other options. We've tried everything we can think of. And we cry out to God for help. We've lost control of our lives. We finally acknowledge that our lives are completely out of hand. And we cry out for help.

It was that kind of cry that inaugurated the redemptive story of Israel. It was the "tsa'aq" of the Israelites, living enslaved to their Egyptian masters that started something new. God heard their cry. He acted and things began to change. God sends help. God sends someone to rescue them from their oppression. God sends a shepherd by the name of Moses to lead them out of bondage. This exodus becomes the central, organizing story for the corporate life of the people of Israel.

And on their way to the Promised Land the people meet with God at the foot of Mount Sinai but before God speaks, He tells Moses to remind the people of the Exodus, to remind them that God heard their cry and rescued them from their oppressors.

What God gives the people of Israel at Mount Sinai is an invitation. He says to them, "Think about what has been done for you. You were enslaved in Egypt. You cried out to me and I heard your cry and I set you free. Now go make that happen for others. The freedom from oppression that you're now reveling in, help others know what it is like to be free.

All of the grace and mercy that was shown to you when you could do nothing for yourselves, show that grace and mercy to others. In the same way that I heard your cries, hear the cries of

others and do something to help them." God wanted His people to bring liberation to the weak in the same way that He brought freedom to them when they were weak. Did they do that?

To some extent, yes they did. But a number of generations later, after Israel amassed great power and wealth, Israel became in some ways, a new Egypt.

When we accumulate great power and wealth, when we have vast resources we can go one of two ways. We can use all of that to reflect the heart and character of the God who gave it to us in the first place. We can live lives that hear the cry of the widow, the orphan, the poor, the oppressed, the wounded, the fearful, the broken, the frightened. We can use our great power and resources and respond to the cries of the oppressed or we can turn a deaf ear.

More than 200 years after their rescue from Egypt we read this in 1Kings 9:15, *"This is the account of the forced labor that King Solomon conscripted to build the house of the LORD and his own house, the Millo and the wall of Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer..."*

Forced labor? Forced labor to build the house of the Lord? Slaves to build Solomon's house? People conscripted against their will to build the wall around Jerusalem and the military outposts of Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer, outposts designed to protect the storehouses that held the wealth of the nation of Israel? Solomon is building a house for the God who sets slaves free and he is doing that with slave labor. The descendants of the people who once cried out "tsa'aq" in Egypt are now enslaving other people.

Solomon is now inflicting on others the same kind of injustice his ancestors experienced. And God is not happy about the way His people are living. Listen to Isaiah the prophet.

Isaiah 58:1-2 - *Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to MY people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God...*

God calls His people rebels. They are people who seek God every day! God is astonished! "ME they seek! Of all things they seek ME!" These are people who say they are serious about their faith. They think they look like a nation that pursued righteousness and did not neglect the justice of God. But the key words are "AS IF they were a nation that practiced righteousness." To be "like" such a nation is not at the same thing as being such a nation.

Isaiah 58:2, *They ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. 3 "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"*

God is stunned by their questions. "Hey look God. We're doing all of this, we're following the rules. We fast but what do we get out of it? We humble ourselves but you don't notice us. We've deprived ourselves of food. But you pay no attention to our acts of self-denial.

Isaiah 58:3 *Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. 4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked*

fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. 5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

NO! Why will their voice not be heard in heaven? Because their religious practices like everything else in their lives was to serve their own interests. The main force of this passage is to challenge the religious to make a connection between their faith and the treatment of the poor. Their neglect of their workers, their neglect of the poor, their lack of attention to their relationships with others was so great it was the only thing God could see.

Isaiah 58:6 *Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? 8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. 9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

In so many ways, Israel's story is our story. God still looks for a people who will show the world His true heart and character. God wants each one of us to see His love for us in His Son Jesus Christ. And God wants us to make that love visible to the people of the world. God searches for a community of people who will

care about the things He cares about. We are called to be that people, people who hear the cries of the widow, the orphan, the poor, the oppressed, the wounded, the fearful, the broken, the frightened. To miss this, to turn a deaf ear to these cries is to be disconnected from the heart of God.

To hear the cries of people in need and to respond with loving action is what it means to abide in the love of Christ. John 15:9 *As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."*

By the grace of God, may we have a deeper experience of the love God has for us and may we make our home in that love so completely that we increasingly show the reality of that love to the people in our lives and in the world. And you know what? As we show that love, we will grow our capacity to trust and experience the love God has for us.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com