

Sermon Series: Connecting With God

Week 7: Reconnecting With Love

1 John 4:7-8, 16-21 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a, 13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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The number 7 has a deep and spiritual meaning in the Bible. From the creation stories on the first pages of the Hebrew Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament, to the end of the New Testament, the number 7 was used to represent completeness, even perfection, both physically and spiritually. Perhaps you have noticed that this is the 7th sermon in the series, "Connecting With God." While not a complete consideration of this topic, and certainly not a perfect one, it is nonetheless the final sermon to complete this series on spiritual formation.

Over the weeks, starting on June 21, we have worked to expand our understanding of what it means to connect with God, to actually experience the Presence of God in our midst. For structure in this series of sermons, I have focused on a different chapter title each week from the book ***The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings***, by **John Philip Newell**. I again encourage you to buy and read this remarkable book. Newell, as a reminder, is an ordained Church of Scotland minister, a scholar in the field of Celtic spirituality, and a former Warden of Iona Abbey in Scotland, where I spent a week in May during my sabbatical.

In this book, and throughout his work in the field of spirituality, Newell proposes that **we can move toward a connection with God not by searching for something from without ourselves, but rather by reaching deep within to connect with the Sacred Presence that dwells within all creation.** We accomplish that, he suggests, by reconnecting. We have talked about reconnecting with the earth, with compassion, with the Light, with the journey, with spiritual practice, with nonviolence, and today's topic, reconnecting with love.

How is the "rebirthing of God" within you and me, and within this community of faith, experienced through a reconnection with love, a term that is almost undefinable? After all, even the great Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist Carl Jung said of the mystery of love, "I have never been able to explain what it is." But Jung did say the apostle Paul came close when he wrote to the church in Corinth, love "bears all things," and "endures all things." In chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians, often called the "Love Chapter," Paul poetically states what has been used at countless marriage ceremonies, even though he was addressing the love that should be demonstrated among those in a community of faith, not specifically the love between two people in marriage.

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.*

*It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends. (vv. 4-8a)*

We are to understand, then, **when we connect with others with that kind of love, we are connecting with God.**

You often hear progressives say that *what* you believe isn't as important as *how* you put what you believe into action. That, of course, is a good corrective to strict orthodox dogma. However, when it comes to spirituality, what you believe about the nature and character of God is of paramount importance in how you experience God's presence. That's why so many of us are drawn to the New Testament book of 1 John. Let me repeat part of this passage.

*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;
everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.
Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.
Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another...
If we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us.*

- 1 John 4:7-8, 11-12

God is love, and love is God. Therefore, there can be no rebirthing of God within us if we don't reconnect with love. While I know of no Christians who would disagree with that statement, **a large segment of Christianity has chosen, nonetheless, to focus on an understanding of the nature and character of God as judgmental, condemning, and even needy. This is a unfortunate consequence, for example, of taking the traditional doctrine of substitutionary atonement literally.**

An obsession with personal salvation, when tied to this particular ancient doctrine, **assumes that there is a price needed to be paid for God's forgiveness.** That price was the death of Jesus. The doctrine states that although a payment needed to be made to make us right with God we are not worthy to make payment ourselves. Therefore, a substitute sacrifice was needed. God, in the form of a perfect Jesus, died on our behalf to appease an offended God.

Does anyone else have a problem with a God that can't or won't forgive until blood is shed? Some suggest that's simply a leftover from ancient mythology. And doesn't that seem to run counter to our understanding and deepest experiences of love? Newell writes:

Who are the people who have most loved us in our lives amid our failures and betrayals? Could we imagine them ever requiring payment to forgive us? **True love is free.** Perhaps so much wrong has been done by this doctrine that the cross [itself] has become an irredeemable symbol for many.

If that is the case, then we need to work to redeem an understanding of the cross. Essentially, **the cross** "is a symbol of the mystery at the heart of Christianity's great gift to the world – **the belief that love can reconcile all things.**"

Drawing on her Jewish heritage, 20th century French philosopher, mystic, and political activist Simone Weil (1909-1943) wrote, "The universe is an expression of love and **everything in the universe is essentially a means to love.**" Think of the implications. Newell poetically writes:

The rising sun is a means to love, as is the whiteness of the moon at night. Every life-form, the shape of the weeping willow by the distant pond, the song of the robin in the hedgerow, the light in the eyes of every creature – all these are the means to love. I am a means to love, as are you, your children, and your nation. Do we know that? Do we know that this is our sacred role in the world?

When we become aware that what is deepest in the heart of the other is a resonance, or living vibration, of the Sacred – whether that be in a tree or another plant, a wild creature, or another human being – we find ourselves wanting to say yes [and to be in relationship]. We find that our heart is drawn to the heart of the other.

So where is the Sacred to be found? In the body of the earth, in our human bodies, and in the body of our communities and nations. This is what it means to understand that **all of creation is not only made by God but also of God.**

I believe the words in 1 John 4:19-21. **“We love because God first loved us.” That doesn’t sound like a God who needs a sacrifice in order to make things right.** It continues, “Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

Going back to my sermon a few weeks ago when I reflected on the “Say No To Hate” Coalition of Tulsa, we are given a very strong directive not to fall into the trap of automatically categorizing and demonizing those with different views from ourselves as ‘haters.’ As I mentioned, sometimes it’s a fine line between being hated and becoming a hater in return. This, we are commanded, must not be part of our lives as followers of Jesus.

Celtic spirituality sees the nature and character of God as a Sacred Presence that dwells within all of creation, more than as an Almighty Being out there somewhere. This leads to a more tolerant and accepting understanding that God is not confined to one particular religious tradition, practice, or sacrament. Christianity, for the most part throughout its history, has not been able to humble itself enough to realize that reality.

Martin Buber (1868-1965), the great Jewish philosopher and theologian, said, “I do not believe in Jesus but I do believe with him.” Newell concludes, “What if Christianity had gotten that one right? What if we had realized long ago that **the important thing is not getting the world to believe what we believe, getting others to subscribe to particular beliefs about Jesus? The important thing is inviting the world to believe with Jesus, to believe in the way of love.**”

Progressive Christianity, in my opinion, is starting to get that right. This radical approach to a life of faith suggests that **calling oneself a Christian is not ultimately what matters. “What matters is whether you and I believe in love. What matters is whether, with Jesus, we are following the way of love, for this is all we need.”** To quote theologians John, Paul, George, and Ringo, “All You Need Is Love.”

Take Newell’s words to heart, **“We are made as a means to love. It is God-given. The question is whether we will live what we truly are – love.”**

Let me conclude this entire sermon series with a couple of sentences that I think best summarizes the Celtic way of life and faith.

What is deepest in us, and in all created things, is not opposed to God, rather it is of God. Therefore, all of creation is interrelated and can act as a means to reveal and experience the Presence of God.

Taking this to heart is how God is “reborn” in us:

- reconnecting with the sacredness of the earth
- reclaiming the way of compassion
- seeing the Light in all things
- recommitting to the journey, including with other faiths
- rediscovery of spiritual practice
- rededication to nonviolence
- and above all else, a reuniting of ourselves to love.

Hopefully, this series of sermons has broadening your own understanding of what it means to connect with God, and of spiritual formation. And perhaps it has even been affirming in that you have been connecting with God all along, more than you ever realized.

Amen.

Resources:

John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2014