

Hannover International Worship
21 May 2017
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Acts 17:22-28
John 14: 15-21

Friends, grace to you and peace from God our creator and the Lord Jesus Christ. It's wonderful to worship with you as always and to be welcomed to share some reflections on scripture with you again as preacher. As a family, we have been grateful for this community over the past few years and the friendships we have come to know because of it! We continue to pray blessings on this house.

This might not be the best way to begin a sermon because I want to point our memories back to the time when Princess Diana died. Thinking about death might not be the most uplifting way to begin but it might stir your brains and your hearts as you think back to that time. Can you recall the time when her death occurred? I don't have many distinct memories but I do remember seeing news clips on TV and feeling the shock of the way her death happened.

But there is one aspect of that time I would like to point our memories towards – the flowers and the memorials that sprung up quite quickly after her death. I was struck once again by the enormity of it while watching the movie *The Queen* that showed real footage of the scenes in the midst of that portrayal. There were miles of flowers placed around the city in response to her death. I use the example of Princess Diana because of the sheer scale of memorials that were placed around London but we can also see smaller scale examples of this on a daily basis. We as human beings have a deep-set desire or response to do something to mark the passing of a life of someone we love or whom we revere. Professor Pete Ward of Durham University uses these illustrations of memorial making as this deep-set need for worship in his book *god's behaving Badly*. As human beings, it seems we have an innate need for worship.

The Apostle Paul points us in this direction as he addresses people in Athens in the words of Acts today. Listen again, "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with

this inscription *to an unknown god*. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.” Just as in the days of the Apostle Paul so it is with us – we are all worshipping something whether we are aware of it or not. You can see this as memorials are put up when someone dies. You can see this as football fans gather together to watch a game. You can see this as music fans attend concerts. Do you know the band the Grateful Dead? When the Grateful Dead were still playing live shows there were people called Dead Heads who would travel the country with them attending all of their concerts such was the extent of their allegiance. But the nature of the true God who made heaven and earth is the unbound nature of Christ as we see in this season of Ascension this coming week. Jesus is not found in temples built with human hands nor is served by human hands. But through God we live and move and have our being. Because Jesus lives we too are made alive in Christ.

Last month on Easter our friend Tony talked about how Christ tore the veil that separated us from a relationship with God and this month it was amazing to me to see the similarities between last month and this because it is the nature of the Holy Spirit to undo the boundaries that separate us from receiving the love that God has for us. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit as our helper and comforter we have the opportunity to dwell securely in the love of God through Jesus Christ. You see I think these echoes of worship that we see in memorials or soccer games or following famous people reflects a yearning in all of humanity to worship – we all long to adore and be adored and here in the nature of God we find just that.

But now, put yourself in the position of the disciples and the emotional rollercoaster that is the season of Easter. Jesus has attempted to prepare you for all the changes that are about to take place, yet you can never quite believe him. He’s arrested, held for trial is crucified and you are crushed. But then he meets with you in the upper room after his resurrection and you are ecstatic! But now he’s informing you that he has to leave and return back to the Father and you are delved back into depression yet again. No wonder the disciples are found on the hillside on Ascension Day staring off into the clouds – I would be too just trying to get my head around what exactly is going on! But God did not leave the disciples as orphans nor us – we have been given a Counselor, the Spirit of Truth, to be with us forever!

And this is how the Spirit of Truth tears down the walls of separation in terms of the work and power of Jesus Christ. Christ, in his earthly ministry, can only be in one place at one time – can only minister in a finite location with a finite number of people. But through his resurrection and ascension with the gift of the Holy Spirit his power is now not bound to earthly limitations. God’s love can now be shared with both Jew and Gentile. Christ’s love can be felt by both male and female, slave or free, young or old. The power of the Holy Spirit resonates in the person of Augustine as well as Martin Luther King Jr.

So what is our response to this love, this gift of the Holy Spirit promised to us as Counselor or Comforter? As Jesus said, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, they are the ones who love me.” C.S. Lewis wrote in his book *Surprised by Joy*, “God was to be obeyed simply because he was God. Long since, through the gods of Asgard and later through the notion of the Absolute, He had taught me how a thing can be revered not for what it can do to us but for what it is in itself. That is why, though it was a terror, it was no surprise to learn that God is to be obeyed because of what He is in Himself. If you ask why we should obey God, in the last resort the answer is, ‘I am.’” Hear the words again from our passage in John: “The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.” Friends, it may seem trite sometimes to hear the same phrase over and over again but we have it here before our very eyes once again, you are loved by God! You are loved by Jesus! The object of our worship and the source of our purest love and joy is the person of Jesus Christ and in God, the creator of heaven and earth. The pure object of our love and affection is the eternal one who loves us first with unstopping, never giving up, always and forever love.

What are the commandments that God would have us obey? The ten commandments came to mind but then we can remember Jesus’ new commandment in simplified form: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. The first and very interesting question that came to mind for me as I reflected on this was **how do we show our love for Jesus as individuals?** And I ask that question of you today! How will you show your love for Jesus in your personal life this week? I had a friend who told me a story once that during one of his devotional times with God felt as though God wanted him to tell a joke. So my friend told Jesus a joke. I have no idea what is stirred in your heart at the moment as you

contemplate this. Perhaps you will show your love for Christ by not complaining this week. Perhaps by calling your parents? Perhaps by lending a hand to someone in need while you are doing your errands? I have no idea but my hope is that this will resound in your heart and mind this week.

The second is **how will we love our neighbor this week?** I would like to share with you a story from my own life but not as a way to boast or seem superior, but as a way to show the simple steps that can be taken to show our love for God by how we treat our neighbors. I took intensive language lessons during the months of March and April and had a number of classmates from Syria and Iran and Iraq. One day one of my Iraqi classmates came to class downcast and subdued. We all wondered what was happening because he was typically boisterous in class. Through our limited German language it turned out that he was very concerned for his wife who is pregnant but suffering a great deal from morning sickness. She had been so nauseous that she hadn't been able to eat very much through a good portion of her pregnancy and was feeble and exhausted. Our teacher suggested that she try motion sickness bands on her wrists that help alleviate the nauseous feeling by keeping pressure points down on the wrists. You could see he had no idea what those were but I told him I had an extra set at home actually and could bring them the following day. My kids get terribly carsick so we keep them at home for times we have long car rides. So I did just that – brought the wristbands, showed him how they worked – a very simple solution and left it at that. The next day, however, my classmate greeted me by saying how much his wife had eaten the night before. He listed everything that she ate and at first I was quite confused. Why is he so excited about everything that his wife consumed? But then it dawned on me of course, she could eat, and eat a lot at that I guess, because she wasn't sick to her stomach! Loving your neighbor, because God first loved us, can be as simple as sharing your wristbands. You'll hear a bit more about an opportunity to love your neighbor in a few minutes when we collect the offering!

I think sometimes true devotion to God and the ability to be faithful in showing our love to God can be daunting at times. We don't want to look silly if we're the ones who are asked to tell Jesus a joke. We don't want to do anything that might seem too radical for our friends and family. But I believe this is the other substantial boundary that the Holy Spirit overcomes - because the Spirit, in our passage today, is translated

from the Greek word parakletos as Counselor or Comforter. But one commentator that I read noted that some of the power is missed in this translation because we have lost the full meaning of the word Comforter. We think of someone nice and tender who might put their arm around us when we are sad. But Comforter comes from the Latin word of fortis which means to make brave! Now doesn't that change our thinking! Jesus surrounds us with his sacrificial love, asks us to obey his commandments, and then gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit who makes us brave in order to fulfill those commands!

Beloved of God, we can see shadows of worship all around us but we know the one true God who has made heaven and earth. I encourage you to, in a new and fresh way, show your love to Jesus this week. Find a way to love your neighbor as yourself, and remember that you are not alone but are made brave through the power of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

O God, your Son remained with his disciples after his resurrection, teaching them to love all people as neighbors.

As his disciples in this age,
we offer our prayers on behalf of the world
in which we are privileged to live
and our neighbors with whom we share it.

Open our hearts to your power moving
around us and between us and within us,
until your glory is revealed in our love of both friend and enemy,
in communities transformed by justice and compassion,
and in the healing of all that is broken.

Guide us in the path of discipleship,
so that, as you have blessed us,
we may be a blessing for others,
bringing the promise of the kingdom near
by our words and deeds.

On this day Lord God we offer prayers on behalf of the Kirchentag that will take place this week. We pray that the presenters will be filled with your prophetic words pointing us towards your heart and vision for this land. We also pray for all participants that they will be stirred to love you more fully and to extend that love in new and refreshing ways in the weeks and months to come. May your Spirit renew and transform.

We also pray for the city of Hannover and for all of those who work to make this city a wonderful place for all people to live and work and grow. We pray for our city leaders as well as those who work in the arts and recreation areas. May this city be led by you Christ and may those who are new to this city come to know you by the hospitality that is experienced here.

Finally Lord we pray that we will have eyes to see your presence in our lives that we might be able to extend our love for you in the thoughts and activities of our lives. Make us brave Holy Spirit and continue to fill our lives with your miraculous love.