

“You Are Worthy of God’s Love”
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Menifee United Church of Christ

A guy dies and goes to heaven. St. Peter meets him at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter says, “Here’s the deal: You tell me the good things you’ve done in your life and I will give them points and when you get to a hundred points, you’ll get into heaven.” The guy says, “Okay. Let’s see. I was married to the same woman for 50 years. I never cheated on her. I loved her with all my heart.” St. Peter says, “That’s terrific! That’s worth one point.” The guy says, “One point? Okay. Well, I went to church every Sunday. I gave to the church.” St. Peter says, “That’s wonderful! That’s worth two points.” The guy says, “Two points? Well, Okay. All right. I volunteered at a soup kitchen and a homeless shelter for many years.” St. Peter says, “Wow! That is fantastic. That’s worth three points.” The guy says, “Three points? At this rate, the only way I’m going to get into heaven is through the grace of God!” St. Peter says, “Bingo! One hundred points! Go on into heaven.”

Many Christians believe in God’s grace: That we need God’s grace to be saved. That we need God’s grace to achieve salvation. That we need God’s grace to get into heaven. Probably the person who believed in God’s grace the most lived about three hundred years ago. A preacher by the name of Jonathan Edwards. Jonathan Edwards’ most famous sermon was, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Jonathan Edwards basically says that we are all worthless worms and we should be dropped into the garbage by God. Not exactly the health and wealth gospel. I can’t imagine Joel Osteen preaching “Sinners In the Hands of an Angry God.”

I would never preach, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” I don’t believe in that kind of God. I don’t believe in a God who created us to hate us. I don’t believe in a God who is a Supreme Bully. I don’t believe in a God who thinks we’re garbage. I believe in a God who is just the opposite. I believe in a God who sees us as glorious, not garbage. I believe in a God that created us to love us, not hate us. And I believe in a God that sees us as worthy of love, a God who isn’t a Supreme Bully, but is a Supreme Being.

“Well that’s mighty good, Pastor, but is that just you spoutin’ off? Or can you give us some Biblical references for what you believe?” Well, yeah, I think I can. In Genesis, Chapter 1, it says God created us in God’s image and I don’t think the image of God is garbage. In Genesis, Chapter 1, it also says God blesses us. I don’t think God blesses us to hate us. In 1 John, Chapter 4, it says God is love. I don’t think a God of love is a Supreme Bully, I think a God of love is a Supreme Being.

Now don’t get me wrong. I do believe in God’s grace. I believe we are here because of God’s grace. I believe the heavens and the earth are here because of God’s grace. I believe the animals and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are here because of God’s grace. But what I mean by “God’s grace” is probably not what Jonathan Edwards means by “God’s grace.” By “God’s grace,” I don’t mean God’s mercy – that God has mercy on us and therefore doesn’t kill us, which is what God would really like to do, but because of God’s mercy, God doesn’t kill us. I don’t believe in that kind of God. I believe “God’s grace” to mean God’s love. That God loves us. God created us in God’s image. We are children of God and God blesses us and loves us. But don’t take my word for it. Listen to the Son of God, Jesus.

According to the gospel of John, we can see Jesus loves us and God loves us. In the gospel of John, Jesus goes to Samaria. He’s all tired out, so he sits by Jacob’s well. A Samaritan woman comes up to get some water. Jesus says, “Give me some water.” The woman says, “Say please!” No. She said, “Why would you, a Jew, ask something of me, a Samaritan?” We remember from the story of the Good Samaritan that Samaritans and Jews didn’t really get along; they kind of hated each other. So it’s unusual for Jesus to ask that. Jesus says, “If you knew who I am, then you would say, ‘Give me living water!’ which gushes up inside of you and is, essentially, eternal life.” The woman says, “I want that! Give me that living water!” Jesus says, “Go get your husband!” The woman says, “I don’t have a husband.” Jesus says, “You answered truthfully, because the fact is you’ve had five husbands and the man you’re living with now is not your husband.”

There are various commentaries about this. Some say the woman is a serial divorcee, that’s why she’s had five husbands. Some say she’s a serial widow. That’s why she’s had five husbands. Some say she’s a prostitute. That seems to be the popular one. Jesus, of course, knows why, because he’s Jesus. He says, “I will give you this water if you go get your husband.” She says, “You must be a prophet!” and then the disciples show up. Some of them think, “Why is Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman?” Again, because Samaritans and Jews didn’t get along, but also because she’s a woman. They apparently thought she had cooties. Then she goes off and tells other Samaritans to “Come and see the guy that told me all about my life. He must be a prophet. Maybe he’s the Messiah!” So they come to Jesus and they “come to Jesus.” They see Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus gives them the living water. Jesus gives them eternal life. Jesus gives them God’s grace, God’s love.

Now think about it for a moment. The disciples, the religious, just saw the woman as a Samaritan and thought, “She’s not worthy.” They saw her as a woman and thought, “She’s not worthy.” But Jesus didn’t see that. Jesus’ love transcends gender. Jesus’ love transcends nationality. Jesus’ love transcends religion. Jesus’ love transcends everything. God is the same way. God’s love transcends gender. God’s love transcends nationality. God’s love transcends religion. God’s love transcends

everything. God loves everyone. The woman of Samaria is worthy of God's love just because she is. Because she is a child of God. Made in God's image. You are worthy of God's love.

Dieter Uchtdorf knows that God loves us. Dieter Uchtdorf is a leader in the Mormon church. Dieter Uchtdorf says, "Although we are incomplete, God loves us completely." That's who God is. God loves us completely. We just have to accept that fact.

So why is it hard for us, or at least for some, to accept God's love for us? I don't know. Maybe because, in the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament, God doesn't seem very loving to us sometimes. God doesn't always love us, God loathes us. God isn't always happy with us, God is sometimes angry with us. God doesn't always support us, God is wrathful toward us in the Hebrew scriptures.

Think about the story of Noah and the Ark. It's a wonderful children's story, isn't it? Oh! God tells Noah to build an ark and he does and then he puts the animals on two by two. Oh! It's so sweet and wonderful! But then, when we become adults, we realize the rest of the story. God sends rain on the earth to kill all the other people and animals and everything that isn't on the ark. Yikes!

"Oh, but Pastor, that's just a story. That's just a little mythological story. That's like a parable of Jesus. It's just to show us the moral of the story, which is that you have to get on board with God or you'll be left out in the cold and left out in the rain." Okay. But then the story continues. God has to put a rainbow in the clouds to remind God not to kill us! Apparently, God's memory is such that God needs to be reminded not to kill us. That's what God would really like to do according to that story. Again, that's not the kind of God I believe in.

Then, thankfully, along comes the New Testament. Along comes Jesus. Along comes God 2.0. The God of the New Testament loves us. The God of the New Testament doesn't loathe us. Jesus loves us. Jesus doesn't loathe us. God is happy with us. God sees all that God made, including us, and says, "Very good!" That's the God I believe in. That kind of God. A God of love, not a God of fear.

It's like in the movie "Monsters, Inc." In the movie, monsters scare the kids to get their fearful energy that runs their town. But then, the monsters discover that, wait a minute, they don't have to scare the kids. If they make the kids laugh, that gives even more energy to them. Instead of hate and fear, they give them laughter and love.

I think that's what God gives us. That's how God sees us. As needing laughter and love, and not fear or hate. I think that many churches would do well to offer laughter and love, rather than fear and hate. Now I grant you that many churches that offer fear and hate are bursting at the seams, people are hanging from the rafters. But I think they'd have even more people if they had love and laughter for people rather than fear and hate from God.

"The Shack" tells us about God's love. "The Shack" is a movie that a few of us went to see last weekend. "The Shack" was a popular book a few years ago and now it's made into a movie. It's about this guy who is very devout, follows God, but then his daughter is kidnapped and he has a crisis of faith. Then God sends the guy a message to come to The Shack and the guy knows where The Shack is. So he goes to the shack and he sees God and he sees Jesus and he sees the Holy Spirit.

Now some fundamentalist churches boycott "The Shack" because God is portrayed by a woman, a black woman, no less, and, as we all know, God is a white man with a long beard, sitting on a cloud in heaven someplace. No, we don't know that. Jesus told us that "God is spirit" and, as far as I know, spirit does not have a gender.

One nice thing about the movie is that Jesus is portrayed by an actual Israeli, not, as sometimes happens in the movies, Jesus is portrayed as a blond, blue-eyed surfer from California. As I often say, Jesus probably looked more like Mel Brooks than Mel Gibson. Jesus, of course, was Jewish. Then the Holy Spirit is played by an Asian woman. Anyway, the basic premise of the movie is that God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit teach the man about love and forgiveness. They get him to the point of forgiving the kidnapper.

It shows that God loves us and understands why we sometimes make mistakes, or make errors, or sin. God understands why the kidnapper sinned. Another point the fundamentalists might not understand or agree with: It seems like everyone goes to heaven, which, if that's true, where is hell in all this? It doesn't seem, from reading "The Shack" or seeing "The Shack" that hell even exists. God is all about love and forgiveness.

That's the God I believe in. I believe in a God who loves us at least as much as I love my daughter. Now, I've loved my daughter since the day she was born. I even loved her before that. In fact, I read to her when she was in the womb. It was a little crowded in there and dark, but I managed to read to my daughter when she was in the womb. I loved her no matter what. When she was just a couple of months old, I had her on my shoulders and I was bouncing her up and down and her mom says, "Well, I wouldn't do that, because she just ate." But I didn't care. I was bouncing her up and down and I hear, "Bleah!" It seemed to take forever for her dinner to plop on my head. But I loved her anyway. That didn't matter. I mean, it did a little, but I

love her anyway. That's how God is with us. I mean, I don't suggest that we puke on God's head, but God loves us no matter what. That's just who God is. God is a God of love. God sees us as being worthy of God's love. I have a little plaque on my desk that says God loved you from the from the first time God saw you. That's who God is. God loves us. And Jesus loves us.

"Jesus loves me, this I know." We sang that all the time when I was a kid in Sunday School. "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong; they are weak, but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so." We sang it earlier.

I kind of wish that song included the idea that Jesus loves everybody, not just me. Otherwise, I think we get a kind of spiritual narcissism: Jesus loves me, but he can't stand you. Which is an actual song by a comedy group in Texas called the Austin Lounge Lizards. "Jesus Loves Me, But He Can't Stand You." So I wish we had a song about how Jesus loves everybody, not just me, or you.

Maybe God would get a better rap if we didn't sing "Jesus loves me," but we sang "God loves me." When I was a kid, we did sing, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." Whenever I hear that song, I think of that old commercial for an insurance company: "You're in good hands with Allstate." You're in good hands with God. Because God loves you. God cares about you. God supports you.

What do you think? Do you think you're worthy of God's love? I hope you do. And I hope you believe that everybody is worthy of God's love: Christians and Jews, Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims and atheists, everybody. Americans and Mexicans, Europeans and Russians, Asians and Africans, everybody. Men and women, young and old, straight and gay, everybody is worthy of God's love. I think even St. Peter at the Pearly Gates would believe that and would give everybody a hundred points because God loves each one of us. God is love and you are worthy of God's love.

Let us pray:

God of love,

Help us to believe that we are worthy of your love.

Help us to know that we are worthy of your love.

And help us to know that everyone is worthy of your love.

Now and forevermore.

By the power of the Holy Spirit.

And in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

*(This sermon was delivered without manuscript or notes
and was transcribed from a recording of it.)*