

SERMON TITLE: God's Love Is...
SCRIPTURE: Matthew 1:23; Luke 15:1-2; Luke 15:11-32

DATE: December 13, 2020
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Have you ever been in a relationship and for no reason at all just felt distant from the other person? Why does this happen? Have you ever felt that way in your relationship with God? I have had numerous conversations over the years with people who feel like they've tried to connect with God through prayer, Bible reading, and other spiritual movements, but continually feel distant. Is that true? Is God really far from us no matter what we do?

In Matthew 1:23 we are invited into the birth story of Jesus. In this passage an angel is talking to Joseph in an effort to calm him and bring clarity. (I think most of us would be confused if our wives claimed to be both a virgin and pregnant). The angel also gives him instruction on how to name this child. "They shall call his name Immanuel" (which means God with us).

However, this is not just a name for Jesus, but a declaration to all of humanity that God is near. He is not far from us. He has not turned away from us. In fact, it's the very opposite. God, throughout all of Scripture has been pursuing his people. He walked in the garden with Adam and Eve, He met Moses on the mountain, He lived with the Hebrews in the wilderness, He sent messages to his prophets, He inspired music through the Psalms, He dwelt with the Israelites in the temple, and now He had put on flesh to live as a human with us.

In this season of Advent, as we are awaiting the celebration of Christmas, we meditate on the love of God. We are drawn to one of the most prevalent threads throughout all of Scripture: God is with his people. Jesus not only modeled this through his earthly life, but taught this in Luke chapter 15, highlighting what the love of a Heavenly Father is like for his children.

Luke 15 begins with Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners - people who the culture of religion would deem "bad". And so those religious leaders get upset with Jesus for his actions. In their reasoning someone who is with God should not associate themselves with those who are far from God. This, however, is actually the opposite of the Gospel. Jesus begins to tell three stories to the religious leaders:

1. A shepherd loses his sheep and goes after it.
2. A woman loses a coin and finds it.
3. A father loses a son and...no one goes looking.

All three are important, but the last one is a little different. It is the only one of the three where the very object that is lost has no one trying to find it. In that culture it would have been the older brother's duty to go and try to find the lost brother - to reconcile him to the family even at his own expense. But because the older brother has not gone to find his lost brother, Jesus has become our good brother who has sought us out even at his own expense. Luke 15 begins with Jesus treating sinners as friends and ends with a story that has no resolve. It ends on a cliffhanger. It is Jesus' way of circling back to the accusation. "You're upset because I'm eating with sinners? Of course I am! I am the good brother who seeks after that which is lost."

Jesus doesn't defend himself or launch into a theological discourse with the religious who are upset. Instead he tells stories. Throughout this parable Jesus is revealing what the love of God is like. He defines three distinct things:

1. The love of God is patient.

SCRIPTURE: Luke 15:11-16

- The younger son wants his inheritance (wishes the Father were dead)
- The inheritance would have been split between the two brothers. 1/3 goes to the younger.
- The Father's wealth is linked to land. Land was linked to status.
- The younger son is basically asking the dad to rip apart his own life.

The father doesn't scold him or shun him. Unbelievably, the father in the parable meets the requests of the younger brother and gives him his share of the inheritance. The love of the father moves him to suffer at his own expense.

2. The love of God is permanent.

SCRIPTURE: Luke 15:17-24

- The younger son reaches the end of himself and forms a plan – a way of earning himself back into the estate.
- The Father is scanning the horizon, waiting on his son.
- Seeing him, the Father runs, which is shameful for a middle eastern man in this day and time.
- The Father is not interested in any speech of the son earning his way back in.
- The Father doesn't expect his son to clean up, but instead immediately covers his filth (evidence of lifestyle) with the image of his riches (his robe, ring, and sandals).
- The Father throws a party and kills a fattened calf (delicacy in that day)

It is almost uncomfortable to read the love the father models here. It is so endless, sacrificial, and selfless. Parents especially will be able to empathize with the pain the father must have been feeling which makes it all the more unbelievable that he makes no conditions for his love. There is no way to undo it. There is no way to "out-sin" it. It remains unchangeable.

3. The love of God is present.

SCRIPTURE Luke 15:25-32

- The older brother is upset and insults the Father - "look".
- The older brother was using the Father to get what he wanted too.
- Restoring the younger brother would have been at the older brother's expense!
- The Father ran to the younger son AND went out to the fields. The Father initiated in both cases.

The father is the pursuer. He is the initiator. He meets both sons where they are at and tries to invite them both into the celebration and warmth of home.

God is not far from us, even though it may feel that way at times. God is near. The declaration of Jesus' very name speaks to that truth. *God with us*. How is the love of God displayed? God pursues his people even to the point of becoming like them to seek and find them and bring them home.

Discussion Starters —

- What's one thing that stood out to you from Matt's sermon?
- Have you ever felt far from God before? Would you be willing to share why or why not?
- How have you seen the theme of "God with us" throughout the Bible? What about your own life?
- What is Jesus revealing about the love of God through the three stories in Luke 15?
- What were the three observations about God's love highlighted in Luke 15:11-32? How have you seen examples of these in your own life?
- Have you ever found yourself in the shoes of either brother? Running from the Father like the younger or bitter with the Father for his love towards sinners like the older? Would you be willing to share a little bit from that experience and what you've learned?
- How do you need to apply these stories to your heart? Do you need to come home? Do you need to join in on the celebration? Is God calling you to be the one who goes after those who are lost?
- Is there something that you need to do in order to help you remember that God is with you every day? What are some practical ways you can build this habit?