



Sermons from
First Presbyterian Church

“When Hearts Condemn”

The Rev. Evans L McGowan

April 29, 2012

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Psalm 139:1-10

I John 3:16-20

Last week I spoke of three trees: one at the beginning of creation, one at the end of time, and one at the center of our existence, the cross: the intersection of death and life and where God’s love explodes into the world. We continue to celebrate Easter by exploring this love which conquers the world by risking everything to be vulnerable and available to all.

The author of 1 John implores us to love like Jesus loved, meaning to lay down our life for others. To not just say we love one another but to act like it. We are to trust God’s love is greater than our own, a living current of warm softness and soft warmth that upholds our being and the being of the Universe. Yet do we truly believe – truly *act* – as if God’s love is bright enough to overcome our darkened souls, is warm enough to melt our hardened hearts? Do we trust this love to redeem our motives, to raise our bodies, and to save our souls? Do we believe this love to be all around and through and living in us?

God has searched us and knows our inmost parts, the psalmist declares, before asking,

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

Have you ever tried to flee from God? Where has it taken you?

I ran. I fled. I sprinted with all my might on that dark, starry night, along that beach in Ecuador. I ran until my feet burned in the sand, and then I ran some more. I ran until the lights far in the distance blurred in my teary eyes, and then I ran some more. I ran until my legs jellied underneath my weight and my arms hung like heavy sacks, flopping and dangling at my sides. Finally my knees buckled and I turned to face the ocean, the crashing waves and the deep dark void of the Pacific. My whole torso slumped in the weight of defeat. I had fled as far as I could. With little strength in what remained, I cried out to the deep, “I can’t do this! ... I can’t learn this language! I can’t be myself with these people! I can’t be here anymore! I can’t ... I can’t do this.” It was the end of the line. I had let go of the rope. There was nothing left. I was vulnerable as a newborn,

Some think of God as the great judge, the one who will decide our fate. But I have news, old news: We don’t need God to condemn us. We do a pretty good job of condemning ourselves. And when we’re not

condemning ourselves, we condemn others. And when we do that, when we condemn ourselves and others to a fate without grace, God's love is no longer in us.

Last week I spoke of Mumford & Sons, who sings, Love will not betray, dismay, or enslave you, but that's exactly what we have done. We have betrayed our closest friends, dismayed our loved ones and enslaved ourselves to dreams deferred. We are dead men walking. We are women in the wilderness. We are the condemned. No one can save us.

Back in the second grade, I was just hitting my stride in baseball. It was the year between tee ball and little league, when dads would pitch to their kids. I had just had a great game, knocking one out of the park (granted, it was foul) and another that took one bounce before hitting the fence. The next game I was sure to hit a home run. Better yet, my grandfather was coming to town, eight hours away from Monroe, Louisiana. I wanted to show him what I could do, how good I was. My first at bat, the butterflies swirled in my stomach, and I swung wildly, hitting nothing. My dad, the pitcher that night, tried to calm me down, saying, "Be patient. Wait for your pitch." The next at bat I got called out looking. I couldn't do anything right and didn't hit anything that night, but something socked me hard: "I'm a failure. I don't have what it takes. I can't do this." No one needed to tell me this. I had condemned myself already.

Afterwards, I was so upset I couldn't see straight. Thankfully I wasn't old enough to drive, so my dad drove us home, but on the way we took a detour. We got out of the car, and I followed him out behind my elementary school, head down and feeling so insignificant I couldn't feel most of my body. We stopped at a rock outcropping overlooking an old quarry with a trail along the perimeter. My dad didn't talk about what had happened. He simply said, "Son, when I'm upset, I like to run. I like to get all that anger and frustration out of my system, and just leave it all behind." I continued to stare at the ground, but my body began to sway. I wanted desperately to be free, to no longer be enslaved in guilt and sorrow. Before I knew it I was running, fleeing, trying to outrun those feelings of failure, dread and condemnation. I ran for a long time, so long that when we returned my mother asked if everything was all right. No, everything wasn't all right. But it was better. I'm not sure what happened, but I'll never forget that night. I'll never forget how awful I felt. And I'll never forget feeling better.

Sometimes we run. Sometimes we need to run. Sometimes we must flee from the past, the present, even the future, and grasp for something beyond what we can see or feel at the moment. There is nothing wrong with this. Running gets us to where we need to be. We must struggle with our own condemnation until we reach the end of the line, where we realize how vulnerable we are. How much we need a love that will not betray, dismay or enslave us, but set us free.

So there I was, facing the terrible blackness and the pounding waves, threatening to pulverize my tired soul, my wearied body. My confession hung in the air, the words "I can't" swallowed up by the night. And then the sound of the crashing waves and the sensation of the pebbles digging into my knees began

to fade, and in the stillness a voice spoke directly to (in?) my heart. “You’re right, Evans – you can’t.” [Pause] “But I can.” I had condemned myself to “I can’t,” and the Lord of the Universe answered in sovereign grace: “But I can.” My chest melted as God’s love poured into my heart. My parched soul drunk heartily from this restored spring of life.

Here are the rest of the lyrics:

*Love it will not betray you
Dismay or enslave you, it will set you free
Be more like the man you were made to be
There is a design, an alignment, a cry
Of my heart to see,
The beauty of love as it was made to be*

I was released from the bondage of “I can’t” into the freedom of “God can.” Who is in a place to condemn us? Only Christ, the one who sees all things. And Christ does not condemn us but cherishes us, love us through and through, no matter how far we flee, no matter where we run. The teen who cannot escape his present situation is also the child who is never abandoned by his father. *Nothing* shall separate us from the Love of God. We may condemn ourselves and others and even God, but God never condemns us.

In the deep dark night of the soul, a voice whispers: Arise, child. The dawn is breaking. The dead are raised. There is new life here. The old has gone, the new has come. Love has exploded all around you.

So let us not give up on God, ourselves or each other. Let us love not only in word and speech, but also in truth and deed. While we may flee from God, it is all part of the journey – the pilgrimage of faith – as we walk the path that Jesus walked. May we encourage one another to open up our hearts to the Spirit of love, light and new life, now and always. Amen.

Invitation to Table:

God’s love is here, now, at this table, where all are welcome. All Jesus asks is that you trust in this love. When you come forward to the table today, think of your hands as your heart opening up, ready to receive God’s love. This bread is a seed waiting to be planted deep within you. This wine is a cup waiting to nourish your deepest desires. What shall spring forth? Only God knows.

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