

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, June 9, 2024
10am

Text: Psalm 138

Theme: Ascribe to God: Immutable in Love

[prayer]

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to see one of my favorite worship artists, All Sons and Daughters, in concert. The band was promoting their album “Poets and Saints,” which was inspired by their travels in Europe. Each song on the album is inspired by a different Christian poet or saint: C.S. Lewis, John Newton, Saint Therese of Lisieux, John Calvin, among others.

When the band reached Milan in Italy, they spent time studying the life of Augustine of Hippo, a theologian who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries. Saint Augustine spent the first half of his life looking for fulfillment...in women, money, knowledge, and religion. Then, he met Jesus on a bench in Milan while reading Paul’s letter to the Romans. Augustine realized he had been created with a holy and eternal longing that could only be satisfied by God. He wrote about this discovery in his journal. We know this body of work as Augustine’s *Confessions*, one of the greatest pieces of Christian literature.

The band took Augustine’s journal entry and put it to music:

“For who is Lord but the Lord?
Who is God except our God?
The highest.
The most good.
The most mighty.
The most omnipotent.
The most merciful, yet most just.
The most hidden, yet most present.
The most beautiful, yet strongest.
The stationary, yet incomprehensible constant.

You cannot change, yet You change everything.
You are matchless, O Lord.
So our praise of You must rise above our humanity.
You made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its place of rest in You.”

Sounds like a psalm, right?

Our God is a God of paradoxes: Merciful, yet just. Hidden, yet present. I am especially captivated by this line: “You cannot change, yet you change everything.”¹ God is changeless – a “stationary, yet incomprehensible constant.” But God is also the engine of life, and life is always changing. How is that these two characteristics can coexist? This is the mystery of God. We cannot completely explain it; we can only experience it.

The last few weeks we have been using the psalms to help us understand the doctrine of God – the fundamental characteristics of who God is. God is omnipresent – always present. God is omniscient – all-knowing. And today we consider this statement: God is immutable – never changing. Immutability is one way that we distinguish human beings from God. We are always changing. We are fickle creatures! But God is not. God is steadfast.

The psalmist and all of Scripture point to God’s love as proof of God’s immutability. “Your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever” (v. 8 NRSVUE). Who God *is* is expressed by what God *does*. God’s steadfast love is demonstrated through God’s actions. God faithfully answers the psalmist’s prayers, increases his strength, and looks upon the lowly with favor. God preserves the psalmist from the wrath of his enemies, reaches out with His hand to deliver the psalmist from evil, and fulfills His promises.

Last week we reflected on God’s intimate knowledge of each of us. God is not a God who stands apart from His creation, winding it up like a clock and then letting it go. God stands in and with creation, interacting with our lives. We call this interactive relationship *providence*.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVKjCKYSGT4>

Theologian Paul Tillich wrote, “Providence is a permanent activity of God. He is never a spectator; he always directs everything toward its fulfillment...through the freedom of man and through the spontaneity...of all creatures.”² God is faithfully and creatively engaging with an ever-changing creation. God works alongside our free will to fulfill His purposes – not manipulating, not pulling hidden levers behind a cosmic curtain, but guiding and convicting and responding. God’s response to each one of us may change according to our unique needs and circumstances, but the foundational principle for all of God’s actions – Love with a capital “L” – never changes.

The Hebrew word for this unchanging love is *hesed*, which means steadfast love (v. 2). *Hesed* is God’s loyalty toward His creation. God is lovingly committed to act on our behalf. *Hesed* appears 245 times in the Old Testament, with 127 of those occurrences in the Psalms. It is one of the fundamental characteristics of God and the basis for our trust in God. For Jews, God’s greatest acts of *hesed* were delivery from slavery in Egypt and captivity in Babylon. For Christians, God’s *hesed* was demonstrated most clearly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

But for the psalmist God’s *hesed* is more personal. God’s steadfast love is made real for the psalmist through God delivering them from their enemies. We do not know what kind of crisis the psalmist was delivered from, but they have lived through and come out on the other side of suffering. Gratitude leaps to their lips: “On the day I called, you answered me...You increased my strength of soul.” (v. 3).

It is a gift to be brought through a trial or tribulation and discover on the other side a deeper strength and resilience than we previously possessed. God’s answer to our cries does not always come in the form we expect. We do not always get the cure or the miracle or the resolution we hope for. But as we give thanks for God’s *hesed*, gratitude trains our hearts to recognize all the ways that God has been and still is being faithful. We look back and we see God’s sustaining hand in all the signs we could not detect when the suffering was at its worst.

Recognizing God’s *hesed* is a spiritual discipline that develops over time. Like all matters of faith, it must be intentionally cultivated. Psalm 138 ends on a pleading note: “Do not forsake the work of your hands” (v. 8). If God’s love has brought us

² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:266-67; quoted in Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, *Readings in Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 146.

all this way, then surely God's love will finish what God started. Surely God's *hesed* will not quit in the middle of our lives. And yet, we all have those moments of doubt when we wonder if God has walked off the job, gone AWOL.

Doubt and faith live side by side in our souls. They are two sides of the same coin. We cannot know what faith is without also knowing doubt. I do not think our doubt is a reason for shame. Questions are part of what makes us human. But think back to the words of Saint Augustine in his journal entry centuries ago: "Our praise of you must rise above our humanity."

God's immutable love is the magnetic North to which we orient the flickering compasses of our souls. Our thoughts and feelings about God may change. We will have our questions and doubts. But our changeable minds and emotions do not change the fact that true North exists. Even as the ground shifts beneath our feet and we question the details of what we believe and even Who we believe, we can keep orienting our lives to the work of Love with a capital "L." God's love keeps calling us and shaping us whether we choose to believe in it or not, whether we call it divine or something else. It never changes.

We sing the story of our deliverance with our hands more effectively than with our mouths. Who we are as Christians is defined by what we do with our faith. And faith is not just a set of beliefs that we consent to. "They will know we are Christians by our love." This past week we made a powerful witness of love to our community in three ways: Our presence at Pride in the Park, hosting homeless families in our building through Family Promise, and feeding hungry neighbors with the 2nd Harvest Mobile Market. It was a lot for our small church to do in one week, and I want to thank everyone who stepped up and helped, because over and over I heard the same refrain from the lips of the people we were serving: "Thank you for being here. Thank you for caring."

We may wonder whether our actions make a difference. But I am always surprised by the big impact that small acts of love can make. We were an encouragement to countless people this week. Our witness was a reminder to the people who most need it that they can depend upon the steadfast love of God. We can depend upon it, too.

We cry out in our need and God responds in Love. But the story does not end there. God has promises to fulfill, and a purpose to unfold and complete. Love will not leave unfinished what Love has begun. “For I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). So keep orienting your heart and your hands toward Love, friends.

Amen.