

God's Relentless Love

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

John 10:22-30

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

Nineteen years ago, on Sunday, October 6, 2002, I preached my first sermon in this sanctuary as your pastor. It was a personal testimony called *Confessions of a Former Jesus Freak*. I shared my faith story about a child of the church at First Presbyterian, Midland, Texas growing up, going off to Camp Chimney Springs in Mayhill, New Mexico and becoming Jesus Freak. It was the early seventies. I was an impressionable preteen who eventually carried a big King James Bible to school and handed out gospel tracts to the hippies in the park.

My second sermon the following week was a continuation of that personal testimony. It was called *Reflections of a Reforming Calvinist*. My faith story continued with my call to ministry in the ninth grade and a journey of both head and heart as a religion major in college and a seminary grad. That teenage Jesus Freak eventually grew up and became a Presbyterian pastor.

When I graduate from Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, I described myself as an "Obnoxious Calvinist." At the wise age of 28, I thought I had all the theological answers to life's questions. I was trained to be the resident theologian of a southern Presbyterian church in the 1950s. The problem was I graduated in 1984.

The pains and problems of life and my congregation soon showed me that I didn't have all the answers. In fact, I was left with a lot of unanswered questions. But as I walked with my congregation through heartache and suffering, that once obnoxious Calvinist mellowed and learned to rely on God's relentless love.

God's relentless love is the best theological answer I learned in seminary. It has stuck with me for my past 37 years as a pastor. I believe with all my heart that God's love for us is unconditional, unlimited and unmerited. I believe with all my heart that God never let's go of us, no matter what. Even if we let go of God, God does not let go of us. Even if we deny God, God

does not deny us. God's love is passionately unrelenting, ferociously insistent, and perfectly stubborn. Yes, God's love for us cannot be foiled by anything, not even our rejection of God.

In our story from John's Gospel, Jesus is tested by some critics in Jerusalem. They challenge him to come out and declare himself to be the Messiah or not. His reply is neither yes or no. Jesus had been speaking about his relationship with those who follow in his way. He loves them and they share in community. He describes this relationship with a timely metaphor. It's one that everybody in his world would understand - a shepherd and his sheep.

The sheep and shepherd image were real, poignant, even intimate. Ancient shepherds cared for their vulnerable creatures in loving and fiercely protective ways. Jesus says that's how he relates to his community - to us - to you and me. Jesus says they "hear my voice. I know them..." And to get his point across, he says twice, "No one will snatch them from my hand...no one can snatch them from the Father's hand."

This sheep and shepherd language is a great metaphor for God's relentless love. It says God never lets us go, no matter what. Even if we let go of God, God does not let go of us. God's love is passionately unrelenting, ferociously insistent, and perfectly stubborn. God's love for us cannot be foiled by anything, not even our rejection of God.

My first church out of seminary was Second Presbyterian in Concord, NC. It was a small church with a Prime Timers senior's group. Every month we'd have some kind of program - a speaker, craft or field trip. The day ended with lunch and in between the program and lunch there was a prayer time in the fellowship hall.

We'd gather in a circle of metal folding chairs. Janie Goodnight our church organist played hymns on the always out-of-tune upright piano. The Prime Timers didn't care. Some couldn't hear the sharp and flat notes and others were just focused on their hymn choice. I'd open with a prayer and scripture and they would call out a hymn by name or number. As long as Janie knew it, and she usually did, she'd start playing. We'd sing a few verses, then go on to the next hymn.

One of our Prime Timers was a kind, quiet woman named Ms. Cleo. She was in her 80s, a widow with no children. She'd grown up in the mountains of North Carolina, and moved to Concord as a young woman to work in the cotton mills. She only lived a few blocks from the church which was down the street from the then defunct mill.

Ms. Cleo was a worrier. She worried about everything. She worried about little things like the flowers in her yard and big things like her relationship with God. She had a firm Christian faith, but she still worried.

When the Prime Timers sang, Ms. Cleo always requested the same hymn, month after month, year after year. We came to know it by heart. It's number 833 in our current hymnal, "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go."

I learned Ms. Cleo needed to hear the message. She needed to hear it again and again. “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go.” I told her that she didn’t need to worry. I told her that nobody, not anything, not her doubts, not her failings, nothing could ever snatch her from the arms of her Shepherd. She knew it. She just needed to hear it sung over and over and over again. I have times like that, don’t you?

I wish I could have told Ms. Cleo a story I heard years after she died. I’ve told this story before, because good stories are worth repeating. It was told first by the Rev. Dr. Will Willimon, a retired United Methodist pastor and bishop. It’s about one of the members of his congregation. They were having coffee and he asked her,

“How have you been. How’s your fall been going?

“Well not so good,’ she said. ‘Our son’s been putting us through hell.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ he said. ‘How old is your son?’

‘He’s eighteen, and we have not known where he was for the last six months. We basically changed the locks on the door. I pray for him every night, but we didn’t know where he was. Last week, during dinner, suddenly somebody is pounding on the door. We open the door and there he is! He starts this string of profanity. I said, we’re eating, come on in, sit down and eat with us. He refuses to sit down at the table. He storms back into his room. He slams the door shut, and I hear the door lock.’

‘My husband sat there, then he got up, poured himself a drink, and turned on the TV. That’s how he handles it. I put my napkin down and got up and went down the hall. I went out to the garage, and looked at my husband’s tools. I got this big hammer, this large hammer. I walked back from the garage, down the hall, and stood in front of my son’s door. I asked him, ‘Open the door.’ And this string of profanity pours out.’

‘So, I took that hammer and I leaned back and hit with one good hit. I knocked the whole doorknob, the lock, everything right off the door. Just split the door in two. I barged through the door. My son looked terrified. I caught him right up under his chin like this and I slammed him up against the headboard of the bed and I said, ‘I went into labor because of you. And by God, I will never, ever, ever, give up on you!’”

Amplify that mother’s passionate appeal a thousand-fold and you might have something approaching the relentless love of God. It’s a love that, in the antique words of Ms. Cleo’s favorite hymn, “wilt not let you go.” Not now, beloved! Not ever! Never! Amen.

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