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“Down to Earth”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Lent, Sunday, March 27, 2022
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Holy Scriptures: John 3: 11-17 1 John 4: 7-21

John 3: 11-17

¹¹ [Jesus said,] “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Chosen One. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Chosen One be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that God gave the Begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ Indeed, God did not send the Begotten Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

1 John 4: 11-21

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent the Begotten Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent the Begotten Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and the Creator’s love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in God and God in us, because God has given us of God’s Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Creator has sent the Begotten Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as God is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ We love because God first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their [neighbors], are liars; for those who do not love a [neighbor] whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their [neighbors] also.

Sermon

Late one evening two of my friends named Pat and Jordan
were walking hand in hand under the northern sky.
The stars were brilliant.
Jordan's hand was warm, and Pat was deeply moved.
Pat blurted out, "*I love you, Jordan. Will you marry me?*"
Jordan answered, "*Yes, I will!*"
There was a long silence as they walked on for a while.
Jordan asked, "*Pat, why don't you say something?*"
Pat responded, "*I'm afraid I've said too much already.*"

Today in this dialogue we call a sermon,
a verbal and nonverbal conversation with the Holy and each other,
we are going to explore
how God's love comes into being, ^[1]
how God's love inevitably leads into human love, and
how we are to love one another.

Down to Earth

The Gospel according to John
opens with Jesus of Nazareth causing quite a stir.

First, he was baptized by John in the Jordan River,
Afterward John the Baptist gave this testimony:
"I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him."

Then Jesus went to a wedding in Cana, where he turned water into wine.
Immediately afterward he went to Jerusalem and visited the temple.
There he drove away the animals, turned over tables, spilled the coins,
calling out the moneychangers and religious leaders
for not respecting the House of the Lord.

Such public activity and vivid declarations
ignited the curiosity of a Pharisee named Nicodemus.
Nicodemus wanted to meet Jesus, one teacher to another.
This is no chance encounter; both teachers have a deep need to connect.
Each has something to offer; each has something to receive.
Nicodemus, however, cradled fears.
Maybe he nursed fear of social stigma,
fear of religious reprisal,
fear of personal commitment.
Yet he overcame his trepidation and trembling heart to meet Jesus...at night.

“That it is night
underscores the revelatory character of what is to follow:
the light is to shine in the darkness.” ^[2]

Jesus meets Nicodemus where he is,
in private, in the shadows, under the moon and stars,
where mystery and magic illuminate the darkness.

How many of us have had a heart-to-heart talk with God
in the middle of the night?

Whether in the stillness of the night or in dawn’s first light
we find privacy, stillness, fewer distractions,
and possibly greater focus and concentration.

In the night we stop hiding, cease our running.

We take a respite from our busy-ness,
allowing our wrestling, our struggles, our questioning
to float to the surface
where they encounter the Holy Spirit.

The love of God meets us where we are,
even and especially in the dark, in our solitude and loneliness,
bringing light and grace, comfort and community.

Down to Earth

The love of God come down to earth in human form,
communes with Nicodemus.

Their conversation is cattywampus,
both men on different plains of thought,
yet they each persevere, seeking understanding.

Note that as the conversation progresses,

Jesus’ language changes from the personal to the plural use of “you”.

While talking to Nicodemus, in verse 7 the Greek shifts, including a wider audience,
inviting you and you and you into the dialogue.

Christ teaches, *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God
without being born from above.”*

The very down-to-earth Nicodemus
misunderstood the statement of faith, as many of us have, taking it literally.

He responds,

“How can anyone be born after having grown old?

Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus, ever the teacher, expands the parameters of the conversation.

*“What is born of the flesh is flesh,
and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.
The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.
So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

*“If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe,
how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”*

*“For God so loved the world that God gave the Begotten Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish
but may have eternal life.
Indeed, God did not send the Begotten Son
into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

Down to Earth

Oftentimes in the Bible we only catch a part of the story.
We don't always learn where story endings and beginnings shake out.
Interestingly enough, Nicodemus re-enters the story.

Nicodemus appears later on in the 19th Chapter of the Gospel of John.
We learn that Nicodemus returned again to encounter his beloved Jesus.
Only this time Jesus of Nazareth was dead.
He had died after being crucified on a cross on Calvary.

Joseph of Arimathea was given permission from Pilate to bury Jesus' body.
The Pharisee Nicodemus returned,
testifying with his presence and actions that he was all in,
that he dared to be seen with his Lord and Savior in the light of day.
Nicodemus *“came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes,
about a hundred pounds in weight.”*
They prepared Jesus' body in the burial custom of the Jews,
wrapping him in linen cloths with the spices,
and then they placed him in a new tomb in a garden. --John 19: 38-42

Is there any greater love that is more **Down to Earth**?

God loves
God sends the Son
God refrains from condemning
God's love saves the world

God refuses to remain content
with a world in the process of self-destruction,
a "flesh" furtively trying to maintain itself.
The divine action is love reaching out to the unlovely,
and is expressed [by God] in the gift of [Jesus Christ]." ^[3]

We find love in every language, in every culture, in every community.

*In Portuguese it's called "saudade"
and means "the feeling of intense longing for a person or place."* ^[4]
*The Chinese say "yuanfen."
And to the Swahili, "upendo" is affection and care.*

As you know, Jesus of Nazareth spoke Aramaic
and could read the Torah, which was written in Hebrew.

When Jesus spoke of the love of God, He said **Ahava**.

*The ancient Hebrew word "ahava"
that is often translated as "love" in the Bible
has a unique meaning too.
Love or "ahava" in the Hebraic mind
...is connected directly with action and obedience.
...the Hebrew word "ahava" is not an emotion but an action,
[embodying] the idea of longing for or breathing for another.
Hebraically ahava is a verb and a noun, ...
[made known in] an act of doing.
[Love] is not something that happens "to you"
but a condition that you create when you give.
Ahava is not just a feeling...
[Ahava is a way of living.
Love is the Way of Life.]
The term ahav in Hebrew means, "to give."
True ahava, true love, is [primarily] concerned [with] giving.
[Giving takes precedence over] receiving.
Ahava is about giving devotion and time
[and your entire being, your whole self].
Giving is the vehicle of [divine] love.*

*YHWH so loved the world that God gave,
[God sent, God delivered] the only Son.
Meaningful relationships have mutual giving.*

God's Love came down, ***down to earth***, a gift to all of creation.

YHWH so loved the world that God wants all those in the world to love one another.

You shall love.

You shall direct your love towards God,

giving, serving, devoting your entire being,

all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, all your strength.

And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

You shall love.

You shall have, extend outward a giving love.

God's Love connects us to all that God created and creates.

Love is not emotion.

Emotion, joy, passion may be attached, but love is more.

It has little, if anything, to do with infatuation.

Love is imagination.

Love imagines seeing, hearing, respecting people

in light of the wholeness that God has in store for them.

Love involves seeing someone as having a worth.

Love envisions worthiness in another soul,

even when there is little outside evidence that this is so.

That, my friends, involves imagination.

Imagine the goodness in your neighbor.

Imagine that there is more to a person

than a first impression, or a mistake, or an imperfection,

or a connection with something or someone you find unpleasant.

Such imagination is a gift to you from God for how to love.

Down to Earth

"How do people learn the nature of love? --

How do people learn how to love one another?" [5]

The answer is neither psychological nor social:

The Epistle of John says it is theological.

Love comes from God.

God's love is incarnate in us.

Our experience of sharing the love of God is incarnation itself. [6]

The Epistle of John expresses this so well:

"God is love,

and those who abide in love abide in God,

and God abides in them.

*Love has been perfected among us in this:
that we may have boldness on the day of judgment,
because as God is, so are we in this world.*

*There is no fear in love,
but perfect love casts out fear;
for fear has to do with punishment,
and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” (1 John 4: 16b-18)*

“Certainly the love of human beings for one another contains much fear
– fear of loss, fear of betrayal, fear of mistaken trust.” [7]

To say there is no fear in love, as John does,
is to testify that God’s love precludes fear.

To preclude is to avert, to forestall,
to prevent from ever happening.

God’s love precludes, averts any fear we might have of God.

God’s love overcomes.

Be not afraid!

Perfect love casts out the trembling or trepidation or fear we carry
of choosing to love one another.

Perfect love casts out fear,
like the fears we might nurse of getting to know and trust each other.

Terri Hoard Owens is the General Minister and President of the Christian Church.
The Rev. Dr. Terri Hoard Owens offers down to earth wisdom, saying,

*“In these unprecedented times, more than ever,
we must have the courage
to imagine a new church for a new world.*

*We must give ourselves permission to change
and also to live in freedom from fear.”*

Such courage
to imagine a new church for a new world
can only come from God.

One Sunday morning here in worship Yolanda Lewellyn was our Elder.

She prayed for the Bread at the Communion Table.

Yolanda Lewellyn said – and here I paraphrase:

“God, help us to love one another.

*Remind us that we don’t get to pick and choose
the individuals or groups that we love.”*

She tapped into the call of God to love one another,

to love one another, friends, enemies, sojourners,
to love even the people and groups and tribes
whom we don't pick and choose to love.

Yolanda articulated what the Holy Bible states repeatedly:

Love comes from God.

Love is a blessing that comes down like gentle rains upon the earth,
refreshing our souls, renewing our spirits, showing us the way.

Down to Earth

Last November I got peeved. Frosted.

Over the course of 18 months

four Black Lives Matter signs were removed from our church lawn.

As Ian Fleming said,

"Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action."

When the last one disappeared, I changed the Church Marquee to read:

"4th Black Lives Matter
Sign Stolen From
Church Lawn.
We Shall Overcome."

The next morning a neighbor named Gail rang the church doorbell.

I invited her into my study.

Gail was upset.

For years she admired and appreciated our church marquee posts.

She said the messages of hope and humor and hospitality warm her heart.

However, the message about signs being stolen really, really bothered her.

She received it as responding to a violation with anger,

a response that is beneath us, she said,

because it simply feeds the world's anger that is so pervasive.

We spoke for 90 minutes,

each one seeking to be understood and to understand.

In the end,

I said I would change the marquee

because it mattered so much to her, to my new friend.

After Gail left, I went outside and changed it.

This week, while Tom and Quinn and I were changing the marquee,

Gail walked up to us.

She came onto the church lawn carrying a gift-wrapped present.

She gave us this gift for our marquee messages,

999 of 1,000 of which she liked!

Written on the outside of the gift wrapping paper is a quote by Rumi,
a quote which speaks of the love of God,
a love that teaches us how to love.

Rumi said -- and Gail wrote in her neat, pleasant handwriting:

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field.
I’ll meet you there.”

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

^[1] Texts for Preaching, Year B, Pg. 312.

^[2] Gordon Lathrop, New Proclamation, Year B, Pg. 76.

^[3] Texts for Preaching, P. 362

^[4] “Hebrew Word Study: Ahavah” Daniel Rendelman www.emetministries.com

^[5] Texts for Preaching, Pg. 312.

^[6] Texts for Preaching, Pg. 312.

^[7] Texts for Preaching, Pg. 312.