

9/8/2019

## Open Hearts

Scripture: Matthew 22.34-40, Romans 13.8-14

Series: Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors

**Topic: With open hearts, we receive the love of God for all humanity, and share our response of love to God and neighbor**

As just shared in the Children's Message, today we celebrate Grandparent's Day, and the important influence that grandparents can have upon us.

Greg D. Romano, of Indiana, recently shared with readers of The Upper Room (9/5/19), about "A Forgotten Inscription":

When I was young, my grandmother gave me a small, black Bible with this inscription: "Dear Greg: This little Bible is your very first one, so keep it nice. You are getting big so pretty soon you will be able to read it. I pray the dear Lord will keep you under His wing and help you to grow up to be a strong, healthy boy and that you will go often to the Bible for strength and courage as you go through life. — Gram, October 31, 1968."

I soon forgot the inscription, and as I grew I matured in my faith. Then that Bible was replaced with a larger one.

During a recent time of prayer, I saw my forgotten Bible on a shelf. I read the inscription, and I could hear my grandma's voice again. I was overcome with emotion. How could I tell her how God had faithfully answered her prayer and what a wonderful example of Christ she was to me?

Grandma's prayer and Christian witness continue to be evident in my life. I go to the Bible for strength and courage, and God has never failed to provide. Today as we pray, each of us can thank God for the Christian influences in our lives.

And today we begin a three part series on the United Methodist trademark slogan, or advertising and welcoming "tagline" and promise of Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.

It has been said that our United Methodist brand promise, "Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors. The people of The United Methodist Church," is more than a slogan. It is both an invitation to church and a challenge to go out to serve our communities.

So, what does the Bible say about God's love and open hearts?

† **As broken persons we are invited to open our hearts to receive God's love** that is extended to all humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As Jesus said, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”* (Matthew 11:28 NIV)

Over and over again, he demonstrated an open and loving heart, full of compassion, empathy and forgiveness. Perhaps you have a favorite story which touches your heart, like the Samaritan woman at the well, or one of the many healings he did, or the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Through the love of God in Jesus Christ we receive healing and wholeness as we take comfort in knowing how special we are to God.

As Psalm 34(v.18) reminds us, *“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”*

For as he said, *“I have come so that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.”* (John 10:10)

With open hearts, we receive the love God has for all humanity.

† **We are also invited to open our hearts in response to that love with demonstrations of love**, not only to God in thanksgiving for such a wonderful gift, but also by loving our neighbors, near and far. By giving and receiving love with one another, both Christians and non-Christians, we share in God's love for the world, and find meaning, purpose and fulfillment for our lives, as we become instruments and channels of God's blessings.

Here at Trinity Church, we welcome children with open hearts, through our Preschool, Sunday School, and other children's and youth ministries. We also welcome and care for persons of all ages, genders and identities, backgrounds, classes, colors, and any other characteristics which may distinguish us or tend to separate us.

Within our community, we reach out with open hearts and arms, to persons in many ways, which most of you are familiar as well.

And on a larger scale, we respond to crises and emergencies of various kinds, like Hurricane Dorian. As reported by Linda Bloom Sept. 5, 2019 for| UM News, UMCOR started efforts for Bahamas relief.

“As Hurricane Dorian continued to threaten the U.S. east coast, United Methodists were connecting with Methodists in the Bahamas to start relief efforts.

“The Bahamas Conference of the Methodist Church already is fielding requests to help those being evacuated from the “unprecedented devastation” to receive basic supplies and find a place to live, says its president, the Rev. L. Carla Culmer.

“But the survivors also need someone to hear their stories. “We want to see how we can counsel and listen and be there for them,” she told UM News in a Sept. 5 phone interview.

“After striking the island nation on Sept. 1, Hurricane Dorian caused “vast devastation” and left 70,000 people in need of immediate humanitarian relief, says Mark Lowcock, head of the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

“Bahamas Prime Minister Hubert Minnis called Dorian the most damaging storm ever to hit the island group, Reuters reported. Worst hit was the Abaco Islands in the northern Bahamas and Grand Bahama Island. As of Sept. 5, the death toll was 20.

“Culmer, who also serves as the pastor at Wesley-Grants Town Church in Nassau, agreed. ‘People are traumatized because the storm lasted so long,’ Culmer said. “We heard about 20 deaths, but we believe there are many more deaths. The receding floodwaters ‘will reveal a lot,’ she added. “And maybe some of the things it will reveal we won’t be ready for.”

“The Rev. Kelli Jolly, a pastor with the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas, brought her dog and two cats to her parents’ home in Nassau and rode out Hurricane Dorian there.

“Her area saw relatively brief power outages, spotty phone service and localized flooding, but people were returning to work on Sept. 4. The news was much grimmer from the island of Grand Bahama and parts of the Abaco Islands. ‘The videos, the pictures coming out are very horrifying,’ Jolly said. ‘I don’t know if we have ever seen so much devastation all at once.’”

“Jolly was able to verify the safety of a good friend in the Abaco Islands, and she’s spent time checking on and trying to encourage congregation members of Nassau’s Methodist Church of the Good Shepherd, which she serves.

“The neighborly care she’s seeing — the sharing of food and other necessities — has given her a theological point to emphasize. ‘All of this is testimony that God is with us,’

Jolly said.”

Another important aspect of giving and receiving love with our neighbors, particularly those within the church, is the support and mutual accountability of a Christian community where we experience the unconditional love of God in our human relationships as well.

As Paul said to the believers in Rome, *“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”* (Romans 13:8-10 NIV)

† **The Bible offers at least two key concepts to help us understand the implications of opening our hearts to God and our neighbors as followers of Jesus Christ in the world — 1) the law, and 2) love.**

The life and ministry of Jesus Christ does not negate either the significance of the Old Testament or the **law** but offers continued fulfillment of the law. **In Jesus Christ, God offers the gifts of forgiveness, salvation, and covenant, which are embodied in the law given to Israel in the Old Testament, to all peoples.** Similar to the giving of the law to the people of Israel, God’s gift of grace in Jesus Christ does not require obedience as a prerequisite to reconciliation and relationship with God. Rather, God’s love demonstrated in Jesus Christ is offered freely. God desires to be in relationship with us first and foremost. In Jesus Christ God meets us where we are in spite of our brokenness, inviting us into community with God and one another.

The second concept of **love**, perhaps the most significant in the scriptures, is translated from one of the many related Greek terms, agape. Love in this regard describes both God’s love for humanity and our human response of love to God and neighbor.

We can get an understanding of this love from God’s nature revealed in scripture and made known to us in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Love related to the nature of God in Jesus Christ is unconditional and unlimited. This love from God to humanity and our love to God and neighbor, isn’t merely sentimental or an emotional response, but

rather a deep sense of covenant relationship manifested in both our commitment and actions.

These two dimensions of our responsive love to God and neighbor should not be considered separately from one another. One cannot fully love God without also loving those whom God loves. As I John 4:7-11 says. . .

*“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”*

Although the Old Testament concept of neighbor is often understood as limited to other Israelites, within the context of Matthew’s gospel the concept of neighbor is substantially expanded to include even one’s enemies. So, Jesus’ proclamation and embodiment of the great commandment in his life, death, and resurrection, invites us to respond to God’s love with open hearts not only to those whom it is easy to love, but also to those considered seemingly unlovable.

Although the sharing of love is not bound to the church within this community, we find love, support, and mutual accountability to sustain us on our life’s journey. Our open hearts to God and one another are visible demonstrations to the world of God’s invitation to relationship in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

May we, as followers of Jesus, ever be thankful for God’s love, and seek to live out our faith and calling, with open hearts!