

“Stay in Love With God”

The title for this sermon comes directly from Rueben P. Job's little book, Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living. Rueben Job is a North Dakota boy, born in Jamestown in 1928, and he's both a retired pastor and past bishop of the United Methodist Church. If you haven't read his book, I strongly urge you to get a copy. Rueben Job has taken his material from the teachings of John Wesley and given us a clear and concise way to live as Christians. The three simple rules are: 1) Do No Harm; 2) Do Good; and 3), the one I want to examine with you today, Stay in Love With God.

This third rule, Stay in Love With God, makes us ask two important questions: 'Why should we love God with all our hearts, souls, strength, and minds?' And, 'How do we stay in love with God?'

Why do we, or should we, love God?

The answer to that question is two-fold: 1) God deserves our love, and 2) God demands our love.

The Bible uses two of humanity's strongest terms of intimacy to describe God in relationship with us: God the Father and Jesus the Bridegroom.

Mankind was conceived in the imagination of the God of the Universe. Genesis 1 pictures the one and only supreme being who created a perfect and beautiful world for the people He would make. It wasn't until the sixth day, after God had pronounced He was pleased with His creation —the home he had fashioned for us— that God turned to the work of creating humans. On the sixth day of creation, recorded in Genesis 1: 26, "God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing...". Verse 27 continues, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female...". Just as we humans prepare our homes and hearts for the arrival of a baby, God, our heavenly Father, prepared an amazing planet for Adam, Eve, and all mankind.

There are some who don't like to use the term 'God the Father.' They feel, that because our earthly physical fathers may have fallen short or, sadly, have been destructive influences in our lives, we should limit the use of 'Father,' even in a spiritual sense. God is *not* human, however. Scripture tells us God is love, and His love is far and above human qualities. God should be the role model for our parenting. We owe our existence to God, just as we owe it to our physical parents. God, just as good parents try to do, offered rules to live by, consequences

for crossed boundaries, and a true way of forgiveness so we could be reinstated in the family when we fell short.

God gave Moses the Ten Commandments so we would clearly understand HIS boundaries. Verses 9b and 10 of Deuteronomy 5, make it clear, "If you reject me and worship idols, I will punish your families for three or four generations. But if you love me and obey my laws, I will be kind to your families for thousands of generations." What an amazing promise for faithfulness. God will "be kind to your families for thousands of generations." The punishment for turning away from God lasts only "three or four generations." God loves us. Far more than we humans are capable of loving or understanding, the Master of the Universe sees each one of us individually and loves us! Such love is hard to comprehend.

Have you ever read any Children's Letters to God? I did recently. One young boy wrote: "Dear God, I bet it is very hard for You to love all of everybody in the world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it. [Signed] Brad.

Fortunately for us, God and his amazing love transcends human ability to love.

Jeremiah 31:3 reads, "The LORD hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee."

Each one of us here today is present because of God drawing us to himself. We represent an amazing spectrum of belief: from those newly thirsting for Living Water—to those who have made a firm commitment—to those who have lived a life of serving our Lord. We are as individual in our spiritual walks with God as we are physically. God knows us better than we know ourselves, and he lovingly calls to us to draw closer to him.

1 John 4:10 states, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation [payment] for our sins." Verse 19 says it plainly, "We love him, because he first loved us."

God, our heavenly Father, is all powerful. He brought us into existence. We owe him our very lives, our families, our homes, our food, the air we breath, the earth we stand on. But God gave us a free will so we could deny him if we choose, even though he deserves our love. Good earthly fathers and mothers also deserve our love and respect: for bringing us into the world, for providing for all of our needs. But we have a choice; we can rebel and forsake those who love us best.

God, in his extraordinary love, provided a sacrifice that would cover our sins, so we could repent and return to him.

Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, came to cover our sins with his blood and invite us back into the family.

Jesus, as Bridegroom, represents a second intimate relationship in human existence. All believers are part of the church of Christ, and Jesus called the church his Bride. Have you ever considered why Jesus didn't just call us his "wife" and name himself as "husband"?

I'm afraid that marriage has a bad reputation. I'm sure you've all heard that line, "Marriage is like a deck of cards. All it takes to begin with is two hearts and a diamond. Later... you wish you had a club and a spade."

While there are wonderful marriages, and many good examples right here in McCabe, there are also marriages that have gone totally wrong. And even if a marriage hasn't gone totally wrong, it might be in a coma, suffering from lack of love and nurturing. Now, each marriage has times when a husband or wife might feel things have changed, have dulled a bit. Sometime ago, I turned to my husband Jim as we sat watching evening TV and complained a little. "Jim," I said, "Remember when we were dating and you would call and talk on the phone for hours and hours, sometimes keeping me awake to two or three in the morning? Why don't you talk to me like that now?" I admit that a flash of panic crossed Jim's face, but then he calmly replied, "I'm not lonesome anymore."

While married life can become routine and malnourished if we aren't careful, there is nothing dull about two lovers anticipating their wedding. That's the excitement that Jesus wants in our relationship. He wants us longing for him, working hard getting to know him, keeping ourselves pure, and counting down the days to the promised time when Jesus will come back (on a white horse actually!) for us—his bride—his faithful church.

God is not interested in some diluted affection from us. In Deuteronomy 5, verse 9, we heard the words, "I am the Lord your God, and I demand all your love." When Luke 10 was read, we heard again that the Bible tells us we must "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind." And we are also told: "Love your neighbors as much as you love yourself." If we look carefully at the Ten Commandments, we'll quickly identify that the first three laws deal with our exclusive love and relationship with God. The remaining seven, if followed, show our love for mankind/our neighbors.

God deserves to be loved with all our hearts and souls and strength and minds. And he commands that we love him. When we repent of our sins and ask Christ into our hearts, our 'love affair' with God begins. But *how do we stay in love with God?*

Jim's message last week asked, "How will you spend your time?" Just as in our earthly friendships and marriages, we need to spend time with God. We need to exert effort in growing our relationship with him.

If we want to stay in love with God, we must spend time with him alone. You've heard it said that prayer is the greatest wireless connection. Pastor Rick just completed his series on Prayer 101. If we have the ability to talk and think, we have all we need to pray to the God of the universe. We'd have a hard time trying to get one-on-one time with President Obama, Governor Dalrymple, or even Mayor Warford, but the Master of the Universe listens to us when we call! We can stand, kneel, even be in bed. We can call on him any hour of the day or night. We can wear any type of clothing. We can use our everyday language...or any language. Prayer is loving conversation, and, as with any loving conversation, time needs to be spent in listening. Spend time with God alone.

If you are like I am, and believe the Bible is God's holy word, then you recognize the truth inside as God's love letters to us. Imagine sending a note of friendship or love, and finding out the person who received it never opened the envelope, never read the note. God's word will keep us close to him. There is a path of holiness, of keeping ourselves from the world, that God wants us to walk. Sometimes I think we forget that there is a Satan, that angel of rebellion, who wants to steal us from God. Satan whispers that God is dead or irrelevant today. He says science and nature are the ways to go. He lures us away from God by making us lust after all the glittering things the world can offer. And perhaps his greatest and most damaging lie to Christians, is that he, Satan himself, does not exist. We need the Bible to keep ourselves pure for God, to stay in love with him.

When we worship together, God binds us together. God can speak to us through music and the inspired words of his Bible. You may not know the person next to you in the pew, but God does, and he loves that person just as much as he loves you. We are stronger united. We might come to the service troubled in heart and soul, but, with God's help, we will leave stronger and braver, knowing that we don't walk through difficult days alone.

Keeping company with other Christians will help you stay in love with God. When we study God's word together and pray and share our lives, we reinforce our commitment to the Holy One. As we study, God opens our understanding. Those who lead Sunday school classes and studies, share their wisdom with us. There are many workshops, webinars, retreats, and Christian book studies offered. While McCabe can't meet every need, there are many

opportunities offered in and around Bismarck. There is no reason why we can't accept an invitation from sister churches.

If you want to stay in love with God, share your love for him with others. Remember falling in love when you were young and how you told your friends over and over how wonderful the object of your affection was?? I love that song, "Freely, Freely." The refrain is : "He said, 'Freely, freely you have received, freely, freely give. Go in my name, and because you believe, others will know that I live.'" Telling others about the saving grace of our Lord is the best way to love them.

Deuteronomy 6: 4-9 commands, "Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only true God! So love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength. Memorize his laws and tell them to your children over and over again. Talk about them all the time, whether you're at home or walking along the road or going to bed at night, or getting up in the morning. Write down copies and tie them to your wrists and foreheads to help you obey them. Write these laws on the door frames of your homes and on your town gates."

God does not want lukewarm affection and a grudgingly given bit of time, anymore than parents, friends or a spouse would. Our God is not a god of cool reserve and a limp handshake. He wants a red-hot love affair with us. He wants us eager to come into his presence, to learn about him, to worship him. No matter where you are in your relationship with God today, God will meet you and help you to love him more.

Get in love with God and stay in love with him!