

## PASTORAL PRAYER

God of grace and God of glory, this is the hour, this is the day, this is the time to worship. We come to worship you because you are love, you give us love, and we come to be love to one another. God, in all of our worries, in all of our concerns, we turn to you, for while we may find answers, our ultimate answers for existence lie in you and your ways. We give you our worries, our concerns, all that we are, and ask that you change us, you form us in to people worthy to carry the title of Christian, for we seek to abide in Christ. Live in us and empower us as we seek to live in you for our betterment and the betterment of the world around us.

God, we are mindful of the struggles and pain across our world that demands our love in return. For the protests in Baltimore, for the natural disaster in Nepal, for those suffering from the indescribable torture of Ebola, for the places of where war rages and it doesn't hit our ears, we turn to you. God, you love those whose names we have never heard and will never hear, those faces we have not seen and will never see, those people who will never cross our paths, we lift up to you, God of love, and ask that we consistently be transformed into people of love for them, for the people we want to love, and the people we don't care all that much to love. We pray all these things in the name of the true vine, the one we seek to abide in and he in us, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray as one people...

## SERMON

There are a lot of questions throughout history that just have no good answer or the right words available to us to answer it. How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? What did Jesus' childhood look like? How can anyone not love Star Wars? Why don't you hand the ball to Marshawn Lynch when you are on the 1-yard line and have the Super Bowl

hanging in the balance? Think about any time someone does something foolish and you ask them, "Why did you do that?" You can grasp at words, but there never is a good answer.

So, let's go to one of the biggest questions: the nature of God. Tell me who God is in one word. It's hard to, because what words we have seem useless. We struggle how to best say what our Creator is like. Some like to use positive or negative statements, as in God is this or God is not this. Each can draw us closer to God in different ways, but language ultimately fails us. Sure, we can throw out some buzzwords, but at the end of the day, they don't tell us much about how we can live fully in light of the Creator of the Universe. But God is not separated and completely different from us. There are two words that we use to talk about God: transcendent and immanent. That totally applies when we talk about the transcendent God, the God who is far up, beyond grasp and understanding. On the other hand, we have Jesus Christ, who was with us, who understands us, who loves us in a very real way because he was just as human as us while being God. He experienced what we do, and he lives among us in our experiences. This is the side of God who is very present and with us at all times, the immanent God. We experience God because God is not only transcendent but immanent. Sometimes our experiences tell us so much more than any statement or discussion. Perhaps we can learn more in how we experience the principles of God's nature than we can in using many adjectives.

In other words, God must be experienced. We know God by living as God commands because these are what God values, and experience is one of our greatest teachers in life. In that line of wisdom, I think that John 15 is one of the greatest passages about who God is and who we are in light of that because the imagery just can't be beaten. It uses the same word over and over: "abide," which is so multi-layered that it gives you the point when you

sit with it. On the other hand, there is the passage from 1 John, which delves into the same topic as we've been exploring for the last few weeks: love, this time showing how love is the most greatest piece of God's character; God is love. It's time to come back to the source of it all, God as Creator and God in a human being, Jesus Christ, to really find the heart of the matter, as in these persons and their example is where we must abide. Let's look again at John and 1 John to see the character of God and how we must live it to get it.

Theologians and people of faith have agreed for centuries: we can't describe God in a word, but we can start to describe God's nature. Thanks to my teachings from Dr. Larry Graham at Iliff, the word I would use to describe God's nature first and foremost is "relationship," as he discusses in his book, "Discovering Images of God." God wants to be connected with us, and I hope vice versa. We say all the time how we do not exist apart from God. God is everywhere, even when we feel very far apart from God. But God is never away from us. God is with us in our waking and our sleeping, in our happiness and in our sadness, in our laughing and in our mourning, in our living and our dying. God is in relationship with us, and God is relationship. Let's face it, God's very nature IS relationship, connection with another, when you think about it. With that three-in-one trinity concept, we are talking about three persons sharing one nature in relationship with one another. When scripture says that we are "created in the image of God," I interpret that we are created for relationship with one another just as the members of the Trinity relate to one another. Because God is relationship, we are to be relationship also for our health and wellbeing. We are not alone in this world, and we cannot and should not be alone. It's been proven that when people are separated from human contact, they lose an essential part of themselves and become highly unwell. Children raised with loving human contact lose a

crucial aspect of development. Bottom line is that we need one another, and we often become at our most sinful when we believe and do otherwise. We need relationship because it is who God is and who we are, created lovingly and blessedly in the image of God. We come here to relate to one another, to be in relationship with our neighbors, and we become a part of that grand scheme of God. When we relate to God and to one another, we partake in this essential part of God and something that we were created to do as well.

With relationship in mind, we can faithfully turn to our first scripture, because it is an awesome image of relationship. Jesus says in John 15, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." The image is simple but effective: a branch off the vine that bears fruit or doesn't. It all depends if the branch is feeding off the vine. In other words, is the branch in relationship with the vine? Are they connected? Is it receiving nourishment? It begins with the simple verb "abide." Abiding means that there is mutuality; we need each other to thrive. Jesus needs us to be his hands and feet in this world, to be the face of his grace to all people. We need Jesus to live. Growth happens when the branch and the vine are in relationship with one another. If not, the vine grower does the best thing: remove the excess and let the growing vines have room to thrive.

When it does grow, it bears fruit. Like a vine, the Christian life is never an end in itself. What good is a vine if it doesn't bud and bear fruit? We believe in Christ not as an end in itself but that we may, in turn, affect lives for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When Jesus calls us to bear fruit, it's the calling to grow to be more like him. Fruits are a good image, used throughout scripture. Galatians talks about the Fruits of the Spirit: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self-control. This is what

abiding in the true vine looks like in our everyday lives. These are the qualities seen in the Lord Jesus Christ, and we, those who abide in that vine, come to live and learn. You know when the fruit of our lives is good and when it is sour. The podcast Sermon Brainwave lifts a good example of the tomato. A ripe tomato will be juicy, dark red, and flavorful when you bite into it. It's delicious, and you want more. When you have an unripe tomato, it might be light red or green, and it is acidic and sour. It downright tastes bad. The fruits of our lives are the same; we know from being with another if their fruits are more unripe than ripe.

The abuse of this passage comes in when we look at the easily misused passage: "Ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." Well, God, I want a Bears Super Bowl Victory, a Dodge Viper, an advance viewing of Star Wars Episode VII, and lunch from Chipotle. In reality, my only possibility is lunch from Chipotle. What this passage is trying to say is that when we "ask for whatever you wish," we are asking in the spirit of God's intentions and God's path, those things that will help us be only more fruitful. These are things that we wish for corresponding with the path to discipleship, not our own ends. After all, contrary to the world's beliefs, being a Christian doesn't mean that we deposit our prayers in the great Vending Machine in the sky and ask for some heavenly refreshment. Our self-centered desires become secondary to following the path of discipleship.

But 1 John gives this a new slant on relationship. Relationship has to have some meat to it, something that keeps it growing from simple small talk. We keep coming back to this important book because it defines something that is primary, of the greatest importance to what we do here and why we are here: love. The book takes a turn that gives everything else its structure: God is love. We love because God is love. It lifts the greatest example of love: sending God's son to earth and the sacrifice of that gift. What the true vine

takes in as nourishment, it feeds to the branches, and that is nothing less than love.

“Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”

Not only should we love one another, we have a litmus test for faithfulness from scripture: “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” No one can adequately write down all the characteristics of God, as we said before. So, this statement is incredible. THIS is the test of Christianity, this is the test of God’s goodness in us. It’s not how many commandments you have followed, how you have tended to the administration of the church, not how many services you have attended, not how much money you have given to the church (but, please, keep those tithes and offerings coming), not when you have the right politics or call out someone with the wrong politics, but when you love another person, family of birth, family of choice, or beyond family, then God abides here. God is within us, God moves among us, when we are faithfully loving each other. One of my favorite musicals of all time, *Les Miserables*, says it best: “to love another person is to see the face of God.” It’s beyond words when you’ve experienced it, but you know it to be Truth with a capital “T” when you’ve experienced it.

This whole line of theology, these scriptures, mean so much to me because of the world we live in. This world stinks too much and too often with a lot of unnecessary pain. I mourn that I serve a religion often miscast as one that wants to beat people down until they believe exactly the same thing that another person does. This world is already full of pain, exclusion, and misused power, and the Church never needs to add to it. Instead, this is the person of Christ: the compassionate one who lifts those in despair out of the mud, not pushing people into it. “Abide in me and I will abide in you.” It’s never “Believe correctly in me.” We will never heal this broken world, we will never make disciples of Jesus Christ, by

focusing on beliefs alone. “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” After all, we were attracted to the faith, I hope, by the loving example and presence of others, those people who acted as Christ to us. We will attract others by loving one another in full, not as a means to an end. It wasn’t the way of Jesus, and it should not be the way of Christianity today. If God is love, as scripture so eloquently says, then we are to live in love as well, and that begins by lifting one another up first of all before we offer a different way of living and thinking. So I dismiss the Christianity that emphasizes doctrine over love, right statements of belief over compassion, because Jesus didn’t do that. He said, “Come and follow me,” not “believe correctly.” This is love in action; this is God in action. This is the wisdom of the scriptures in these passages and across the whole bible.

It’s more than a metaphor; it’s a reality. God’s nature is seen so very well in the images of scripture, Jesus being the true vine, and God is love. They are just words, and yet, those words connect us to a greater truth. The vine exists to feed the branches, and the branches exist to abide in the vine. From that come the fruits that feed ourselves and others, with the most key of them being love, for, after all, this is the quality of God that we experience in this life, but is yet to be fully perfected. For all that God is and for all the goodness in which we experience as creatures in God’s image, we give great thanks to the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer! Amen and Amen.