

Faith, Hope and Love – Thank God! Message for November 22, 2009

Maybe it's because we are a blink away from Thanksgiving, and today I will celebrate it with my mom, my sister, her husband and son, and my dear Donny – (kids and grandkids are on Thursday in Tempe). Or maybe it's because I'm feeling nostalgic and sappy about all the blessings I have – all those unexpected but appreciated feelings, opportunities, experiences and dreams that God has brought to me this past year.

But when I looked at the lectionary verses selected for this date (which is my main resource for where to start with our worship planning and my sermon), I found that none of them hit me in a place where I could get down into the meaning that would match what my heart feels right now.

So I picked some others. As pastor, I'm allowed to change it! How cool is that!

My first selection is from the book of Romans (the sixth book written by Paul to new Christians and Jews alike) – it is a strong statement of how we find peace and faith from God through grace in Jesus – and it underlines something I've learned this year; that suffering brings perseverance, and perseverance brings character, and character brings hope. In a couple of sentences, Paul emphasizes that these elements of our belief exist only because of God's absolute love for us, which comes from the Holy Spirit. Faith, hope and love – I can honestly profess that God has been steadfast in sharing these gifts with me.

The second selection I found is Psalm 100 – this is a brazen celebration of God's love, and a call to all who hear it (because these were usually sung) to give thanks with joy – God follows through, no matter what! I can't believe how much my life has changed in just one year, and how God continues to work inside of me and pour love onto me. Joy – yes, this year, I definitely feel more than my share of joy because of God's love!

So, I'm asking your indulgence, because today I need to step outside the usual pattern of my messages, and I would like to do something a little more interactive and share some wonderful illustrations of faith, hope and love with you – so just relax and listen. After each one, take a few moments to consider where you are blessed with these gifts from God's love in your life...

(Faith)

From John Ortberg, a prolific theologian and teacher/preacher...

Here's a little experiment: start a sentence with the words "I believe..." and then finish it with something deeply heartfelt. It is impossible to do without feeling uplifted and stirred.

The need to declare our deeply held beliefs is an irrepressible aspect of being human. In the act of defining what we believe, we define ourselves. I am one who can discern what is true and real and noble and bind myself to it. I believe. One of the most flattering things we can do is ask others their opinion, because what they believe matters. ...

To be is to believe. One important question to ask myself is, what do I really believe, and what do I think I'm supposed to believe?

In the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, Sam is trying to encourage Frodo not to give up. He reminds Frodo that all the great stories are about characters who keep going when it seems too hard. They all find something to hang on to. "And what about us?" Frodo asks. "What do we have to hang on to?" Sam responds, "That there's good in the world. And it's worth fighting for."

That one line undid me. I found myself all choked up without even knowing why. I realized later what it was about those words that moved me so: I believed them without trying. Often—partly because of my job—there are statements that I think I should believe or that I want to believe. Sometimes, because I get paid or applauded for affirming those beliefs, I wonder if I really believe anything at all or if I just talk myself into it because I get rewarded. But my heart said yes with unforced passion to this belief: there is good in the world, and it is worth fighting for.

I believe.

How are you blessed with God's Faith in your life?

(Hope)

From writer Lee Oclove – about "Lazarus Laughed," the play.

Early in his career, the great American playwright, Eugene O'Neill, wrote the imaginative play Lazarus Laughed. It's about Lazarus's life after Jesus raised him from the dead. Near the beginning of the play, guests from Bethany are gathering for a banquet in Lazarus's honor. They are all desperate to hear what Lazarus has to say about his experience. As they take their seats, one guest says, "The whole look of his face has changed. He is like a stranger from a far land.

There is no longer any sorrow in his eyes. They must have forgotten sorrow in the grave." Another guest, one who had helped roll the tombstone aside, recalls the scene after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead in even more beautiful terms:

And then Lazarus knelt and kissed Jesus' feet, and both of them smiled, and Jesus blessed him and called him "My Brother" and went away. And Lazarus, looking after him, began to laugh softly like a man in love with God. Such a laugh I never heard! It made my ears drunk! It was like wine! And though I was half-dead with fright, I found myself laughing, too."

How are you blessed with God's Hope in your life?

(Love)

From Christian philosopher Max Lucado's book, "Cure for the Common Life"

The bank sent me an overdraft notice on the checking account of one of my daughters. I encourage my college-age girls to monitor their accounts. Even so, they sometimes overspend.

What should I do? Send her an angry letter? Admonition might help her later, but it won't satisfy the bank. Phone and tell her to make a deposit? Might as well tell a fish to fly. I know her liquidity. Zero. Transfer the money from my account to hers? Seemed to be the best option. After all, I had \$25.37. I could replenish her account and pay the overdraft fee as well. Since she calls me Dad, I did what dads do. I covered my daughter's mistake.

When I told her she was overdrawn, she said she was sorry. Still, she offered no deposit. She was broke. She had one option, "Dad, could you..." "Honey," I interrupted, "I already have." I met her need before she knew she had one.

Long before you knew you needed grace, your Father did the same. He made an ample deposit. Before you knew you needed a Savior, you had one. And when you ask him for mercy, he answers, "Dear child. I've already given it."

How are you blessed with God's Love in your life?

I hope these little stories hit a thankful place inside of you, and that you were able to spend some quiet time with your own blessings from God.

While we all go through challenges, worries and sad events and times in our days, our belief reminds us that we need to cycle back to God's Love and remember how it still shines through any darkness. God is at the center of all parts of who we are and what we do – today, I truly feel this, and hopefully, you do, too.

We also need to recognize and remember we have these gifts of faith, hope and love – that each one is brought to us by a God (through Jesus and the Spirit) who never leaves – who always forgives – who brings peace when it's time.

And we need to thank God for all of it – with grateful hearts, and welcoming souls and open minds. God's Peace to us all – Thanks be to *you*, God. Amen