



LESSONS IN LIVING

Finding the Love in Paul

“Part 4: Outgrowing Fundamentalism”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Hebrews 6:1-3 (*The Inclusive Bible*)
So let's leave behind the elementary teachings about Christ and move on to maturity, without laying the same foundation—repentance from dead works and faith in God, and teachings about baptism, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. And this, God willing, is what we will do.

Sermon

Welcome. Thank you so much for spending the morning with us.

I've had an interesting week. Maybe some of you have heard.

If you were here last week, you will remember that I was trying to challenge people I know are progressive. After the assassination attempt, I said I understand that there could be mixed feelings. I said that. If you're affected by the racism of MAGA, then you might have conflicted feelings. If you are damaged by the lies the Trump administration is telling about immigrants, you could understand why there would be some pain that people would get in touch with.

But I also said that violence is never the answer. Even hating the people who are different is a mistake if we're trying to heal the world.

Well, Senator John Cornyn took the first half of that sentence and posted it as a meme, leaving out the part where I rejected violence. As a result, I got some interesting emails this week. So did the church.

I think one good thing about the MAGA movement for me, from a selfish viewpoint, is that it prompts self-reflection. I always wondered: if I had lived in Nazi Germany, would I have protected the Jewish people? Would I have risen up? Or would I be one of those ministers who chose not to “get political?”

Would I have hunkered down and hidden from history, preaching against slavery from 200 years ago, while remaining silent about the economic system that still exists today?

It's good to know that I would rather be dead than have that much hatred in my heart.

That doesn't mean I hate anyone else. But I can't leave the immigrant out of my heart. I can't leave the LGBTQIA community out of my heart.

When a president helps overturn voting rights and wages an ongoing war on the civil rights of people of color in this nation, I do not want that hatred in my heart. I believe faith calls us to stand up for one another...not in hatred, not in partisan views, but in principles that transcend the definitions of our culture.

We're doing a series on Paul, and progressives don't always like Paul very much, which I understand. Part of the motive of this series is to recognize that many of the writings people find most objectionable were not written by Paul in the first place. Also, he lived 2,000 years ago, so he would hopefully have learned a lot between then and now. Still, he was a very radical spirit and the principles that he taught were very radical.

Today we're going to look at a text that may not have been written by Paul himself. Hebrews probably wasn't authored by Paul, but by students formed in his tradition.

And it starts off by saying, *let's leave the fundamentalism behind. Let's leave behind repentance as a focus, resurrection, belief in God...*

Have you ever seen that before? You get entranced when you're raised in a church where you can look at scripture and not see the radical calling that's there, not to Christian orthodoxy, but to freedom...to a mind that's capable of loving, a heart that's capable of loving, and a will that's capable of loving with all your heart, all your mind, and all your strength.

To do that, we have to say *no to cultural religion*. And that's what Paul is saying to do. Fundamentalism traps good people into bad ideas and fears.

You don't have to be a bad person to get caught in a bad worldview. Paul is pleading with people to move past the divides they've been given...religion versus no religion.

Remember a couple of weeks ago, we looked at the line that says, *in Christ there is neither male nor female*. To be a loving person, you must move beyond the gender binary. Paul also says we must move beyond an economic system built on slaves and masters.

You even must get beyond the religion that has Greeks and Jews.

The word Paul uses in this passage for the fundamentals—the beginning—is a Greek word called *arché*. He uses another word for foundation as well.

Arché refers to something that happened long ago (we get the word *archaeology* from that meaning) but it also points to the living principle of an organism. *Arché* is the principle that holds us together. It's sort of like DNA.

In the ancient world, they didn't have science, so they didn't know there was something called DNA. They talked about an indwelling word...a non-tangible intelligence that lies behind our being, of which we are expressions. Finally, *arché* represents the fullness of things. So when you see the word *Archbishop* or *arch* on a building, that's the fullness.

One of the early church founders said, "The greatest glory you can give God is to be a human being fully alive." Fundamentalism is an emotional regression. It is a tree with all roots and no fruit. The story of the cursing of the fig tree was not a curse on Judaism; it was a curse on fundamentalism...on people who had turned religion into something fear based. There was no love, no compassion, no mercy coming out of it.

I'm going to read a passage from the early church. When I got out of seminary, I went back and began reading the early church feverishly, because what I was taught in seminary was that nobody really understood Christianity until Augustine, then Luther and Calvin, came along. The assumption was that those earliest voices had no idea what they were doing, that even the people who knew Jesus didn't really understand him.

What I discovered was that they were incredibly intelligent. If you look at the writings, they're talking about Plato and Heraclitus, people I never heard of in seminary. They were universalists. They were talking about Christianity as a particular expression of a universal message.

This is what one of them said about sense images:

The law itself exhibits justice and teaches wisdom by abstinence from sensible images and by calling out to the maker and parent of the universe.

Don't wear a ring or engrave on it the image of the gods, enjoins Pythagoras.

(Pythagoras was the ancient philosopher who said that everything is mathematics, percentages and ratios.)

As Moses, ages before, enacted expressly that neither a graven, molten, molded, or painted likeness should be made, so that we may not cleave to tangible things but instead move on to intellectual objects.

I think it's like when you're studying math. You have the principles in the first part of the book, and then, at the very back of the book, you have examples. They tell stories that illustrate the mathematical principles: *John has one banana. Mary has two bananas. Together they have 3 bananas.*

I believe the miracle stories in the Christian scripture are illustrations of transcendent principles. If you studied mathematics and you only studied examples that worked with bananas, you

wouldn't understand what math is. You'd have to wait for bananas to come around. *One banana, two bananas...*[Laughter]

If the resurrection only works with Jesus, you've not understood the principle yet. The symbols are meant to illustrate what is always happening everywhere all the time. You don't have to believe in magic to know there's something mysterious and mystical at the ground of your being. You don't need a different universe to experience the sacred.

The first thing Paul said in this passage is that we must move past what he calls the resurrection and even belief in God. Now, if I had said that I probably wouldn't have done very well on the internet. It gets close because there are people who say on a regular basis that I've denied the resurrection. That's not what I've done. I've tried to say that the story of the resurrection is a symbol of a process that is happening everywhere all the time. That's different than denying it.

Why did Paul say this? Paul understood that literalism and legalism will kill a religion of love. He said, *for freedom Christ has set you free. Anybody that submits to the law is a slave.*

We'll look at that passage again in this series.

Paul specifically says, *don't submit to legalism. Don't submit to literalism*, because if you do, you can't escape that cage and get to love. It will shut your heart down.

It's ironic to be accused of being hateful when I've been so careful, for forty years, not to call anybody a name. Now, it may have slipped out somewhere [Laughter]. I'm not perfect. And certainly, it's happened in my head.

But I think for the most part, if you go through every sermon I've given, every one of my posts on Facebook, every interview I've given, I've steadfastly refused to call anybody by a label.

Jesus said, *when you call somebody a fool, you're on your way to hell*. I think that's a very true statement. If I call someone else a name and dehumanize them, I have lost my own reason. Civility is not just about being nice. It's about making sure there's one rational person in the room, and in the early church, being rational was very important. Being honest about the patterns in life is what helped them be artistic and musical.

Now, I understand that somebody that read this this meme that Senator Cornyn shared would be very hateful. We've received a lot of hate and I understand that. If I thought somebody had mocked people who are hurting and in danger, as Trump often does, I would understand that response. I get it.

But when I talk about fascism, and when I describe MAGA as a fascist movement, I'm not talking about individuals. I've never called one of them a fascist. I am talking about a movement.

This is the definition of fascism (see if it sounds a little bit familiar):

Power centralized in any one person.

Hypernationalism.

Militarism.

Victimhood as an excuse for internal cleansing and external expansion.

I could not sleep at night if I remained silent while this fascistic movement threatens democracy, civil rights, and human rights. But that is a far cry from hating individuals.

It seems to me that we all need discernment when we're evaluating whether actions hurt another person, or whether they're fair to someone else. I'm not attacking you when I step in as someone is being bullied. I'm going to sit with the other person. It may feel like an attack, but in that kind of situation, that's what love looks like.

As I understand the MAGA movement, truth means whatever Donald Trump says. If that means firing every scientist on a board and replacing them with podcasters and conspiracy theorists, then that's what you do. Truth becomes so important in this MAGA worldview that you must be willing to lie for it.

All someone in the MAGA movement would have had to do was go to our website, listen to the first line of the sermon, and realize that Senator Cornyn had lied. But he knew they wouldn't do that. He knew they'd been conditioned not to fact-check. It's a trance.

Paul was saying is that the Christianity that's going to lead us to love is not about belief; it's about wisdom. When you read the stories, you don't know what happened two thousand years ago. You can't. When the church tells you to recite these creeds as though you know something you don't know, it's laying the foundation for these movements built on deception.

We don't know what's true, but we know if we're honest. I think the first thing we have to do as Christians is commit ourselves to honesty, and sometimes that means saying, *I don't know*.

The second thing he talks about is we've got to outgrow the simplistic view of baptism and the laying on of hands. I was taught that baptism is initiation into the church and into salvation. When I look at the ancient church, it was an initiation into life. The river was the flow of time, and every human being has to be committed into that flow of things.

But the point is not to take up a ritual or religion, it's to learn the art of life and living. It's the celebration of life itself.

MAGA is pro-life until you're born. They love the little babies until they get a brainstem. Once you're born...

Did you see last week that they're bringing back firing squads?

Pro-life firing squads. Can somebody who's bombing another country in an undeclared war be honestly called, "right to life"?

I think I believe there's the right to life after gestation. I believe every human being *who's born* deserves a right to live. But that's not capitalism, right? Capitalism says, *if you can afford it, you have a right to live. You have a right to medicine if you're rich. You have a right to housing and all these sorts of things if you can afford it.*

The rights in the Declaration of Independence, that every human being has an inalienable right to life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, are not capitalism.

Christianity was about sharing. You can add other systems to it, but you can't take out economic justice and still have the same product. You cannot say, *life is so precious we have to kill to protect it.*

The first call is to wisdom. The second is to the art of living...the Church has rituals, but you have rituals too, and that's where you're probably going to experience the sacred: in the art of day-to-day living.

The third call that I see in this passage is to repent and renounce sin. Now, why would Paul say that? I mean, if you have problems, you need to renounce them, but that's just opening the door. I know ministers who spent their entire career criticizing and judging people.

When you read the teachings of Jesus, they say, *don't judge, don't judge, don't judge, don't judge, don't judge, don't judge.* And then these preachers say, *well, Jesus wants you to judge. Jesus will destroy America if we don't judge these people.*

Paul is saying we have to get beyond that. If we're going to have a religion of love, we have to get beyond it because love is not about moralism, it's about social justice, and my favorite definition of justice is *giving others every right you claim for yourself.*

Justice is giving others every right you claim for yourself.

We're not called to choose sides of good versus evil, but to identify those principles that include all of us. What are the principles of universal human rights? Those are also principles of life.

There's a resurrection that takes place when we live out of that passion for justice.

There was a gay poet in Greece who was attacked and vilified. He wrote a line that said, *they tried to bury me. They didn't know that I am a seed.*

There are social justice movements that have taken that sentiment and turned it into song. *They tried to bury us. They didn't know that we are seeds.*

That is the resurrection. If you just think the resurrection is about something that happened to Jesus two thousand years ago, there's a poverty in your life.

Think of the power and the joy of realizing that life within you is deeper than the hatred around you. The truth that is in you is deeper than the lies that are being told around you. You don't have

to let other people's hatred disturb your peace of mind. Your soul can be an inner temple filled with peace and joy and meaning, no matter what anybody else does.

I'm going to close with this translation of our passage. The translator's kind of a little smart aleck sometimes, which, unfortunately, I happen to like [laughter]. That probably tells you I still have some work to do. This is from Hebrews, chapter 6, verses 1 through 3:

So come on, let's leave the preschool finger-painting exercises on Christ and get on with the grand work of art.

Grow up in Christ.

The basic foundational truths are in place.

Turning your back on salvation by self-help and turning in trust toward God, baptismal instructions, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, eternal judgment, God helping us, we'll stay true to all of that, but there's so much more.

Let's get on with it.

You may have been taught a very impoverished view of Christianity where truth is what you've been told to believe by some preacher. Don't ever believe preachers [laughter]. That's, that's my lesson.

Don't ever believe preachers unless they call you to your own wisdom.

You may be called to a kind of cruelty in the name of rituals...where if somebody isn't baptized, they're not a part of the team.

Let the rituals of Christianity or any rituals that work in your life call you to this joy and art of living.

Finally, let us offer others every right we claim for ourselves...immigrants, people on different parts of the gender spectrum, people from different parts of the economic system, people from countries...

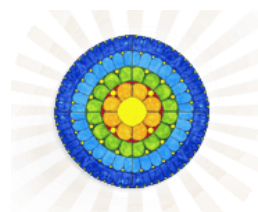
Give others every right you claim for yourself, and you will feel a power within you so that even if they try to bury you, you will know that you are a seed.

Benediction

Rev. Erica Knisely

May we be like trees planted by living water, roots reaching deep into the teachings of Jesus, the teachings of love. In wisdom may we grow and delight in the beauty of sacred life, and may we blossom with love and justice for the healing of the world. Go in peace. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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