

“ROOTED in Love: Part I”

OT: Proverbs 3:1-4
NT: 1 Peter 4:7-11
1 John 3:18-20
1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

Today we are talking about being “ROOTED in Love.” This will be the first of a three-part section so you will have to be sure to come back the next two weeks to put it all together.

Before we start, I wonder if you are thinking what I am thinking? Love. Really again. I know about love. I have heard a thousand sermons on love. What else is there to say? If you have thought this do not worry, I wonder what else there is to say about love too when preparing. But then again, it is not about what is said or even what we know about love. It is about whether we feel it and embody it and express it.

When the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ is truly received it yields transformed lives. God becomes a force in us that cannot be stopped or moved. Regarding love then, unfortunately that message has not been received as God has fully intended it. The world we live in and participate as a member of has a hunger, a starvation, for God’s true love. Artificial love is not enough. It has worn thin. With this in mind then, we need to talk about love every day, every week, every month, every year. We may have heard it all before but apparently it has not stuck as well as we might think. And until it does. Until God’s love is truly felt and embodied and expressed in every nook and cranny of our community and world, we need to continue sharing and giving God’s love. We all need to stop being content with hearing and knowing and actually love without ceasing. No ifs ands or buts. No excuses. Just love!

We all need God’s love in our hearts, pouring through our veins, and showering our neighbors. Listen now for how ‘love’ rests in the heart of these passages of scripture and serve as a guide for us.

Read 1 Peter 4:7-11, Proverbs 3:1-4, 1 John 3:8-10

I will begin by saying this:

The term “Love”, as both a noun and a verb, appears 750x in Holy Scripture. 750x.

(Ahab, Hesed, Agapeo- Agape, Phileo)

Simply put. Love is vital. It is the runaway favorite for most important virtue. Both as a noun and a verb.

God is love; therefore, there is no love without God. No matter how much we like something to the moon and back, for it to be love, God will be found at the center.

And because God is active in life through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, and not a bump on a log or a couch potato, love is active. Love is an expression from God to us and it is an expression from God through us to others, where we are the instruments of God's love. Not only is it that we "ought" to love, but we are able to love, we have the power and strength to love, because God has first loved us.

There is a story I have heard that talks about love from the perspective of beginning with the end in mind. Beginning with the end in mind helps us chart our course and determine our route, working against any tendencies we might have to wonder or simply hope for the best. The story is entitled "Serenity" and it was written by Steve Houchin.

As I stood at the gate waiting to get in, I thought about all the things I had done; the rules I had broken, the wrong choices I had made, people I have hurt. I waited patiently to be judged, as patient as a person can be thinking he already knows his fate.

As I stood there reliving in my mind all of the mistakes I had made, I saw him approach. He was wearing a white suit, so clean and perfect as if nothing could possibly stain it.

His face was perfect and so bright that it was hard to look at it for more than a few seconds without the feeling of not being worthy overtaking me. He was carrying a white folder in his hand, very thick and overflowing with papers, records that would determine just how unworthy I am.

As he stood in front of me looking at me, as if he had a photographic snapshot of my life in his head, a Rolodex to quickly recall the mistakes I have made, He asked me to sit and talk to him awhile. That is when I noticed the clear glass table and chairs that I had not seen before.

As we sat, he offered me a glass of water from the crystal pitcher that was on the table. The water tasted so pure and clean, like no water I had ever tasted before.

When I placed the glass on the table, I calmly stated that I was ready for my judgment.

He looked at me as if with smiling eyes and said "Judgment? I am not here to judge you; you have already done that. I am here to discuss the love you have shown others".

I looked at him with a puzzling look and said, "What about the mistakes I made, the people I have hurt? What about the rules I broke?"

"Rules?" he said, "those were not rules I gave to you, those were promises; promises of what life will be like when you are truly with me. Now, can we get back to our discussion?"

As he opened the folder, he began to smile as he spoke of my great uncle, Mac. Mac was blind and had been most of his life. He spoke of how much Mac enjoyed my company, how much he trusted and loved me. He said that he gives blind people an extra sense that most people do not have, the sense to feel emotions from other people just by being close to them. He told me that my great uncle Mac knew how much I loved him, and he still talks about me sometimes at the supper table.

He then reminded me of the lady I helped on the side of the road when I was in the Navy and traveling cross country. He spoke of me giving her and her five kids a ride from Louisiana to South Florida when she was running from her abusive husband and her car broke down. He told me of how she was able to turn her life around and how she met a wonderful man that is a great father to her children. He talked about the oldest son and how he is a skilled surgeon and has saved many of lives.

Then he told me of my father. I could feel a lump swelling up in my throat, thinking of the disappointment my father must have felt towards me. But he didn't speak of disappointment; He spoke of how much it meant to my dad that I was there with him for his final days he was alive. He talked about the tears I cried with him and how I expressed how important he was in my life. He told me how proud my earthly father was of me and how he has been watching me carrying on the kindness and generosity towards others that he had taught me from such a young age.

He then closed the folder and said "Son, this is not judgment, this is praise! I do not expect any of my children to be perfect, I just want them to love each other as I have loved them."

He then pushed the folder over to me and said, "Here, this is for you. There are many more examples in here of the love you have shown others. This is to help you forgive yourself for the rules you had broken, the wrong choices you had made and people you have hurt."

"Now it is time to go," he said. He stood up and reached for a glass bell that was hanging right over the table; I did not see it there before, just like I had not seen the table and chairs. He began to ring the bell and the sound seemed to echo through my head. The sound was pleasing, like the soft sound of a wind chime made of glass.

The sound seemed to fade as I reached for the folder in front of me. Before I knew it, I was mesmerized by the sound as it continued to fade, as if it was moving away from me.

The man was no longer in front of me and everything seemed to fade to black. I gripped tighter and tighter on the folder, only to realize it was no longer in my hands. I closed my eyes tight, as if hoping to change the darkness that had quickly come upon me.

The ringing sound of the bell was getting louder, as if to be moving closer to me now. I opened my eyes once again and the darkness had lifted and replaced by white. I could still hear the bell ringing as I realized I was staring at my bedroom ceiling.

I reached for the alarm clock to turn off the bell that was still ringing in my head.

Saddened by the thought of this all just being a dream and the realization that the folder I held so tightly to was not in my hands, I stood up out of bed and a shiver came over my entire body. A smile slowly came to me as if I was not in control of my face. And then I realized that the entire contents of that folder I saw in my dream were stored in my memory. It was as if someone had placed it there, cataloged perfectly and with vivid details. It was as if I was watching a movie about me, seeing the pictures so real in my mind. What a wonderful gift!!

Was it a dream or did something happen to me? Years of recalling all of my failures in life, reliving all of the pain I had felt and the pain I had caused, for the first time I saw only the beauty.

I had to share this; I had to tell people what had happened to me.

Was this God talking to me? Was this just a wonderful dream that opened my mind to the life I had hid in a dark corner of my memory?

Whatever had happened, I realized I would never be the same.

For the first time in my life, I saw the book of my life and realized it was a love story. The best part of this wonderful discovery is that the book is not yet complete. I had been shown some of the outcomes of the love I had shared in my life and I wanted more.

That day I reached a new level of serenity and I realized for the first time that the love you give away, the pure unconditional love that you show others, always stays with you.

When we begin with the end in mind, we can figure out the steps needed along our journey to help us get there. The end is a life overflowing with the gift of love given and received- from God and to God, from others and to others.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians at the end of his first letter to their church, and this is my prayer for each of you, our community, and the world:

“Now may our God and our Lord Jesus direct us together. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as I abound in love for you. And may God so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”

Love! It really is that straight forward. No gimmicks. No hidden tricks. Love!

Reinhold Niebuhr, considered one of the most respected theologians of the 20th Century, wrote the Serenity Prayer, and I would like to close with that today:

God grant me (us) the serenity to accept the things I (we) cannot change;
courage to change the things I (we) can; and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
taking, as you did, God, this sinful world as it is, not as I (we) would have it;
trusting that you, God, will make all things right if I (we) surrender to your Will;
that I (we) may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with you forever in the next. (Let all God's people say...) Amen.