

Pastor's Message – 2/25/24
 Guided to the Cross – Guided to Love
 Isaiah 63:7-8
 1 Timothy 1:12-14
 John 19:25-27

The Worship Committee chose a worship series and a Bible study, Guided to the Cross, for our Lent focus this year. We began on Ash Wednesday with a reminder that, in spite of our tendency to sin, to “miss the mark,” God offers forgiveness through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for us. Last Sunday, we talked about how the cross guides into hope. In our Bible study this past Wednesday, we dug deeper into the Bible to see that as we are forgiven, we are to offer forgiveness as well. Today, we are taking a look at how we are “Guided to Love” in this Lenten season.

The word *love* is thrown around rather flippantly these days. We “love” this movie. We “love” that entertainer. We “love” that type of food. The list can go on and on of things on this earth that we “love.” But our love in Christ goes deeper than any of these surface types of love. Love in Christ is displayed most profoundly in the cross. Our journey to love and be loved in a meaningful and rich way ultimately guides us to Jesus and the cross.

As I prepared for this Message today, I was reminded of an old country song by Johnny Lee.

... Well, I spent a lifetime lookin' for you
 Single bars and good time lovers were never true
 Playing a fool's game, hopin' to win
 And tellin' those sweet lies and losin' again
 ... I was lookin' for love in all the wrong places

While some/many seek love in different places and from different people, we know that in the end our desire for everlasting, unconditional love can only be found in Jesus.

But what do we often do instead? We seek love in relationships that might not be the best for us. We seek love in physical attraction and romantic feelings when there might not be much else there. We seek love from our pets and our fair-weather friends. We crave bonds with people on the internet without any real-life experiences with them. Our love tank can be filled with things that we love, such as hobbies and activities, vacations and extreme sports, groups and gatherings. But the love that we possess

from such things can never reach the most personal recesses of our souls like Christ's love can.

Our culture, movies, songs and other media, business and its advertising try to convince us, entice us, bamboozle us into thinking that love is the warm and fuzzy feeling that overcome us in a new relationship: the love brought on by hormones which blind us to reality. The real love that God shows us is story of the prodigal son and the father who watches and waits in prodigal love and forgiveness. It is heard in God's words in words of faithfulness in Deuteronomy 31:8, "The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged." Although Jesus was preparing to leave the world and leave his disciples, he said, "I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you" (John 14:18).

During Lent and our Bible study and worship series, we focus on Jesus' journey to the cross and how we are then guided by the cross to find forgiveness, hope, love, peace, trust, and perseverance. Through the challenges of life and because of and in spite of our sinfulness, Jesus chose to give himself completely to us, even unto death. We see that to-the-death love on full display on the cross. Jesus loved us so much that he died for us. St. Paul reveals how astonishing that kind of love is when he says, "One will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:7-8).

Christ died for us when we did not deserve it at all. He died for us because of his unconditional love for us. He loves us no matter what we have done. We have been created by God and are dearly loved by him. He loves us because we are his own, and he wants to be with us. Would someone who does not love us say to us, "I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20)? Christ gives completely of himself on the cross so that he can spend his time in heaven completely with us. Love is shown most clearly through presence.

That is why Jesus said from the cross that John take his mother, Mary, home to be with him. Jesus wanted the love John had for Mary to be like the love someone has toward a mother. And Jesus wanted the love that Mary had for John to be like the love someone has toward a son. Jesus was creating a family in that moment. He was making a bond of love permanent in the words, "Behold your son" and "Behold your mother" (John 19:26-27). Jesus wants us to treat each other like family, too, whether biological or not, as we live in the shadow of the cross and as we live in the aftermath of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Who is someone not in your family whom you can treat like a brother or sister, a mother or a father in a Christlike loving way, in a way you perhaps did not treat them before? Showing the type of love that Christ did is not always easy, of course. Our love may not be noticed or appreciated. Love anyway. Love may seem to be warranted when it comes to certain people, we know who are callous or cruel or uncaring. But Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44). That is exactly what Jesus did on the cross, forgiving his tormentors and welcoming a repentant criminal into his kingdom. That is exactly what he did in the Garden of Gethsemane when he healed the ear of Malchus, the servant of the high priest, who was among those who had come to arrest Jesus. He did not show any anger when the soldiers whipped him and beat him, twisted a crown of thorns on his head and put a purple robe around his soldiers. He stood silent in the face of attackers. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” Jesus said on the cross (Luke 23:34). There is an undercurrent of love toward them in this statement. He knows it is the sin within these evildoers that is dictating their actions. He knows that even these enemies against him are worth saving and can still be saved through his act of love on the cross, which will destroy the power of sin within them and within us all.

As the day of crucifixion came to a close, the soldiers were preparing to break the legs of the three on the crosses to hasten death. But when they saw that Jesus was already dead, they chose not to break his legs. But in order to determine that Jesus was truly dead, one soldier pierced the body of Jesus in the side with a spear. Blood and water ran out and poured upon the ground. Symbolically, the poured-out blood here is a testament to the love poured out for us all on the cross by Jesus, and the water is the sign of the washing away of sin in this act.

In other words, love streamed forth from Jesus and from the cross. That is why John 3:16 is so popular and remembered among us, because it reminds us of that love. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). The story of Jesus on the cross is at its heart a love story—God’s love for Jesus, God’s love for us, our love for Jesus, our love for God.

And this divine love story continues in our lives, especially during Lent. It continues in the kindness and compassion we show to one another in the same manner as Christ showed to those around him. Our love for the Lord continues in our worship of him in services like this one. God’s love for us is revealed in the blessings of this life that are undeserved—things such

as clothing and food, shelter and work, church and family, friends and loved ones. In Matthew 10:29 and 31, Jesus reminds us that if God cares enough about the sparrows, he will care enough about us. That is God's love in action.

We see our love for Jesus most distinctly this Lent in the prayers we pray to him, in the Scripture verses we read about his Passion, in the moments we take to meditate on the hours Jesus spent on the cross for us. Our honoring of Jesus is a love story in reverse. For we are returning the same love to him that he showed to us. We live in his love when we love without stipulation or requirement or decree. We live in his love when we don't hold back, when we love without limit, when we love fully and freely as what took place on the cross.

The cross invites us to come and find the love of God through Jesus. This divine love is revealed to us in Jesus coming to earth to be with us – to be one of us. It is the love of God that is greater even than faith and hope. It is by the undeserved and yet unconditional grace alone that we can come to God. It is a love that never ends.

Be guided to the cross. Be guided to love. Be complete in that love and live in it forever. Jesus has made it all happen. Amen.