

“A Love Supreme”

1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

Rev. Jason Alspaugh
First Baptist Church
Dayton, Ohio
February 7, 2010

“Get away from me!” he says.

After working the night shift out on the fishing boat, Simon is tired. All of his fishing expertise is now put to work on the shore cleaning nets that are dirty from catching nothing. Without a word Jesus walks past Simon and the other fisherman, and sits down in Simon’s empty boat. And then he asks Simon to take him out away from the shore, so that he can have some space to teach the crowd.

When he finishes his teaching, Jesus does something kind of annoying. Like a backseat driver, he tells the fisherman, Simon, how to fish. “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch,” he says. And Simon is quick to answer the carpenter-slash-rabbi, “Master, we’ve worked all night long and caught nothing. But if you say so...”

And he catches so many fish the nets begin to break, they have to call over a second boat, and both boats get so full they start to sink! Imagine that, all at once, Simon Peter is making connections in his mind between the disappointing night and the surprising morning, the clean nets that are now breaking, the empty boats that are now sinking. And then he looks over at Jesus and realizes that God is incredibly near.

Overwhelmed and afraid, Simon falls to his knees and, for unknown reasons, summed up in the words “sinful man,” he says, “Get away from me!” “You need to go!”

If you were to search the scriptures, you would find that Simon’s reaction is not unusual. For instance, when the prophet Isaiah was in the temple he “saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance about him...and one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’” And Isaiah said, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:1-5)

Fear is a common reaction in the presence of holiness. Perhaps it is the fear that *we* are not holy enough to be in the presence of holiness. It hard for some to accept God's acceptance. Wendell Berry tells the story of a man named Thad Coulter who shot his friend Ben Felter in a drunken rage. Thad is eventually arrested and is visited in jail by his daughter, Martha Elizabeth. She sits next to him consoling him, even forgiving him, but he cannot raise his head to look at her. "In that moment he saw his guilt included love that stood as near him as Martha Elizabeth and at that moment wore her flesh..."

She is the presence of God to him, and he cannot understand how or why she sits beside him after what he's done. "But surely God's love includes people who can't bear it." Thad eventually kills himself in his jail cell, unable to live with the knowledge that he'd killed his best friend. Berry then writes, "People sometimes talk of God's love as if it's a pleasant thing. But it is terrible, in a way. Think of all it includes. It included Thad Coulter, drunk and mean and foolish, before he killed Mr. Feltner, and it included him afterwards."¹

The Apostle Paul himself had to overcome such guilt. His testimony often includes a reference to his former days as a persecutor of the church, before he encountered the Lord on the road to Damascus. In fact, anytime Paul is speaking about "grace" you can be sure the thought crossed his mind. (Perhaps he sees in his mind the image of Stephen being stoned to death, while he stood by in approval (Acts 7:54-8:1)). We catch a glimpse of this in today's epistle lesson: "For I am the least of the apostles," Paul writes, "unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain" (1 Cor. 15:9-10a). Unlike Thad Coulter, Paul was able to accept God's acceptance, and it became his testimony and fueled his ministry to the church at Corinth and beyond. Fear and thoughts of unworthiness may be common reactions in the presence of holiness, but they are not meant to be final. "Do not be afraid," Jesus says.

Most Wednesdays, Ray, Roland and I try to get to the noon-time prayer service at Christ Episcopal Church. We've been doing this for over a year now, and I believe it has become for us a very sacred time. Perhaps one of the holiest moments for me is the time of Laying on of Hands. Those present form a circle, holding hands; and Maureen or John comes around to each of us, anointing our foreheads with oil with the sign of the cross "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And each time there is an "Amen." I can tell you that there are some Wednesdays

¹ Wendell Berry, *Fidelity* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 50.

when it nearly brings me to my knees—to receive, to claim, to accept—that anointing, God’s claim on me.

Paul Tillich once preached that:

“Sometimes...a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*’”²

Discipleship and life with God begin with this acceptance. God’s love and acceptance is a gift that demands nothing, but generates a profound sense of awe and reverence for God, who is with us not only in the sanctuary, but in the boat, on the road, in the jail cell, in the city. And if we can receive this gift, this GRACE it will undoubtedly propel us forward into service and evangelism. Rather than shrink back into dreams of individual salvation or fears of unworthiness, we will become sharers of the good news, fishers of men and women, young and old, gay and straight, rich and poor, black and white, and more. And we will do so with a profound sense of gratitude. At the end of those Wednesday prayer services, John says, “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” And we respond by saying, “Thanks be to God!” Gratitude.

In 1957 jazz saxophonist, John Coltrane, quit a narcotic addiction cold turkey, and a few years later he composed the four-part jazz suite, *A Love Supreme*. On his own liner notes he wrote: “During the year 1957, I experienced by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music.”³ It is fitting then that the opening part to *A Love Supreme* would be called, *Acknowledgement*, as Coltrane presented his talents as “a humble offering to [God].”⁴

Besides the Chinese gong that opens the suite, the most striking feature of the opening part is when Coltrane removes the tenor saxophone from his mouth, leans toward the microphone, and begins to chant “a love supreme...a love supreme...a

² Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*.

³ Ashley Kahn, *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane’s Signature Album* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002), 24-25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xvii.

love supreme.” The chant becomes a mantra that sounds to me like a heart beat; and I would be so bold as to say that it is the heart beat of God that Coltrane is mimicking, acknowledging. Before *A Love Supreme* is anything else, it is an act of gratitude, displaying acceptance, awe and acknowledgement.

Although he generally preferred to let his music speak for itself, Coltrane wrote a prayer in his liner notes. Let some of those words be our prayer now:

I will do ALL I can to be worthy of Thee O Lord

It ALL has to do with it.

Thank you God.

Peace.

There is none other:

God is. It is so beautiful.

Thank you God. God is ALL.

Help us to resolve our fears and weaknesses.

Thank you God.

In You ALL things are possible.

We know. God made us so.

Keep your eye on God.

God is. He always was. He always will be.

No matter what...it is God.

He is gracious and merciful.

It is most important that I know Thee.

Words, sounds, speech, men, memory, thoughts,
fears and emotions & time—all related...

ALL made from one...ALL made in one.

Blessed be His name.

Thought waves, heat waves, ALL vibrations—
all paths lead to God. Thank you God.

His way...it is so lovely...it is gracious.

It is merciful—Thank you God.

One thought can produce millions of vibrations
and they all go back to God...everything does.

Thank you God.

Have no fear...believe...Thank you God.

The universe has many wonders. God is ALL.

His way...it is so wonderful.

Thoughts—deeds—vibrations, etc.

They all go back to God and He cleanses all.

He is gracious and merciful...Thank you God.

Glory to God...God is so alive.
God is.
God loves...Amen.

JOHN COLTRANE – December 1964⁵

⁵ Ibid., 145.