

The Passionate Lover
September 9 and 10, 2023
15th Saturday and Sunday after Pentecost

Series Theme: Connecting People to Jesus

- **Jesus the Passionate Lover**
- **Jesus, The Merciful King**
- **Jesus, the Generous Master**
- **Jesus, the Obedient Servant**

Matthew 18:1-14 See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my father who is in heaven. For the Son of Man came to save the lost. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray.

Dear Christian Friends,

Perhaps you have heard the story of an elderly couple that came into McDonalds one day and placed an order for one hamburger, one order of french fries, and a drink. The man unwrapped the hamburger, cut it in half, and placed one half in front of his wife. He split the fries in half, as well, and placed half in front of her. He set the drink in between them, and they took turns sipping. He began to eat, while she watched. All around them, people were watching and concluded that they could only afford one meal. A young man politely offered to buy another meal for the couple. The old man declined, indicating that they were fine and that they always share. He continued to eat, she watched, and they took turns sipping on her drink. Finally the same young man came over, begged them to allow him to buy them another meal. Again, they declined and indicated that they always share. He quietly asked the little old lady who had yet to eat a single bite what she was waiting for.

She answered, "The teeth." Now that's true love.

True love, of course, is at the heart of our Mission Statement here at Faith Lutheran. A Heart from God / A Heart for Others. Of course, the best place to discover what's on God's heart is to go to the cross, where His love is on full display. It's at the cross where we hear Jesus praying to His Father about you and me, Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.

I've said it before and I'll say it again. If I could wish for the folks of Faith Lutheran to be famous for one thing in Citrus County, it would be that we confess our sins early and often to God and to one another. Because as often as we admit our failures and our flaws instead of defending them, that often the grace of God sweeps over our collective souls and changes everything. And as often as the grace of God is ruling in our hearts and having its way in our relationships, that often, our life together is going to be all about Jesus.

Our sermon series in these final four weeks of my ministry here at Faith is Connecting People to Jesus. That happens to be the mission statement of Hosanna Lutheran Church in Mankato, MN, where our daughter serves on staff as the Family Life Director and their golden retriever Paisley is on staff as the therapy dog.

Their stated *mission is to connect people to Jesus – just as they are – so they might live in their full identity, their full purpose, and their full hope.*

At the end of each service, they repeat these words,

When we follow Jesus at home, our families get stronger.

When we follow Jesus together, we get the support we need.

When we follow Jesus into our neighborhood, our neighbors get the care they need.

Connecting people to Jesus. Our sermon themes these next three weekends are Jesus, the Merciful King. Jesus, the Generous Master. And Jesus, the Obedient Servant.

Today's sermon theme is "Jesus, the Passionate Lover." Dear friends, there are at least two approaches we can take to following Jesus. We can follow Him at a distance, or we can follow Him closely. We can go through life knowing without a shadow of a doubt that we are deeply loved by the Triune God or not really sure.

Two perspectives are offered by our Gospel lesson today, as we explore both the duty and the privilege of helping others to know the passionate love of Jesus.

The first perspective is that of a child, dearly loved, welcomed, encouraged, and trained by his or her parents. And the second is that of a wandering sheep, being searched for, rescued, and rejoiced over by his shepherd.

The perspective of a child, dearly loved, welcomed, encouraged, and trained by his or her parents.

Years ago I read a story written by an author Janice Sue Zeiler. She wrote about how when she was five or six, she had a big writing tablet on which she could do block printing. One day, she took a sheet of tablet paper, folded it in half, and wrote, "I love you" on the inside. She carefully printed her dad's name on the outside, covered the sheet with hearts, and set it on his dresser. The next afternoon she discovered the valentine in the wastebasket.

With tears in her eyes, she lifted the valentine from the trash and stood it up in one more time in the center of his dresser. The next her heart was pounding when she checked the wastebasket again and found it crumpled up and thrown in again. She tried a third time, and the next day her dad called her over and spoke, "Please quit putting that note on my dresser? I already know that you love me."

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus speaks some of the harshest words He ever spoke. That anyone who would cause a little child to fall away from believing in the one true God - it would be better if that person had never been born. Anyone who would not welcome and encourage a child towards his or her Savior - it would be better if a millstone were to be hung around their necks and he be drowned in the depths of the seas.

The context of today's Gospel is that the disciples of Jesus were being guys in the worst sense of that term. They were being absolute knuckleheads. They were guilty of being full of themselves. Worried about the pecking order in their little band of disciples. Busted for arguing about which one of them was greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus responded by sitting down, calling his disciples together, and posing the question of the day, "Who then is greater in the kingdom of heavens?" He then calls a little child to himself and urges them to turn and become like little children. To take on the perspective of this child who was welcomed into the arms of Jesus. Picture a child who humbly cries out for help when help is needed. A child who depends on the adults in her life who are loving her without condition.

I've been trying to focus this week on what it means to go through life loved unconditionally. I know that many of you will resonate with me as I reminisce

- About a father who loved this child 24/7 with no strings attached. Loved me by providing, protecting, encouraging, scolding, and teaching me along the

way. Teaching me not to complain or he'd give me something to complain about. Teaching me by example to work hard, to keep my nose out of other people's business, and to stay humble.

- Reminiscing about a mom who loved this child the first 58 years of my life with a love that was tender, sweet, kind, patient, nurturing and as prayerful as it could be.
- Reminiscing about parents who made sure I was baptized into the family of God, made sure I was instructed by faithful Sunday teachers and catechized by a faithful pastor, made sure I knew the Ten Commandments, made sure I confessed the ecumenical creeds, made sure I knew the value of thanking and praising and serving and obeying and praying and confessing.
- Reminiscing about Debi who has loved me for better and for worse, cared for me in times of sickness and in health, stuck with me in times when expenses exceeded the income and in times when the reverse was true. For 49 years plus - can you imagine? - she has put up with and forgiven my self-centeredness, my bad habits, and my inattentiveness. Her love for this man who never really grew up has been steady, it's been honest, it's been supportive, it's been life changing, and it's been fueled by the love of Jesus Christ.
- Dear friends, even if none of that was true, even if I had suffered through childhood years that were a train wreck and a marriage or two that had failed, my Father in heaven would have loved me with an everlasting love. Still it would be true that God had knit me in my mother's womb beautifully and wonderfully, still it would be true that Jesus was my Savior, my Redeemer, and my best friend forever. Still it would be true that as often as I was quiet and listened to God's Word, the Holy Spirit would be my Teacher, my Encourager, and my Counselor.

The perspective of a wandering sheep, being searched for, rescued, and rejoiced over by his shepherd.

I've told this story and I'm going to tell it again. My dad grew up in the depression year on the prairie lands of southeastern North Dakota. His parents struggled mightily to make ends meet, and in his teenage years, their family farm was foreclosed on. Dad's main assignment as a child and teenager was to watch over the family flock of sheep. His assistants included a sheep dog and a pony. He spent a lot of time making sure the sheep got something to eat and drink and stayed out of their neighbor's fields.

Later in life, I asked him a simple question, “Did you grow fond of those sheep?” He answered in brutal fashion, “No, I hated them. They were stupid.”

Sheep are, by definition, not that bright. In need of guidance. Dependent on their shepherd if they’re going to be lying down in green pastures or drinking the still waters. Isn’t it interesting that Holy Scriptures are filled with this metaphor of Jesus being the Good Shepherd and sinners being the sheep?

In today’s text, Jesus expresses His passionate love for the children of His Father in heaven. He refers to people of all ages who believe in Him as Savior as *little ones*.

He warns His disciples not to ever despise one of these little ones. Woe to the disciple who tempts or leads anyone away from Christ. Blessed is that disciple who helps a neighbor stay connected to Him. Woe to any of us who insist on excusing or defending our sinful habits, but blessed are any of us who are sorry for our sins, blessed are we every time we cry out for the forgiveness of our sins. Blessed are all of these little ones, for their angels always see the face of our Father in heaven.

What do you think? Jesus asks, **If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray does he not leave the 99 on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I say to you that he rejoices over it more than over the 99 that never went astray.**

Dear friends in Christ, on our bad days, we will be those sheep who are wandering through life in aimless fashion and without purpose. We will be tempted to conclude that we are unappreciated and unloved.

On our good days, we will make the sign of the cross and take on the perspective of a child who is safe in the arms of Jesus, a child who is dearly loved and highly valued.

On our really good days, we will be joining our Good Shepherd in His search for friends and neighbors who are straying from the flock.

On every one of our days, Jesus will be the passionate lover of our souls. Amen.