

## Things my Grandchildren have taught me about faith – series

July 22 – Love Freely

1 John 4:7-21

I have always enjoyed being around children. Their innocent enjoyment of the world as they encounter things for the first time allows me to see my world with fresh eyes. Their incredible ability to trust and to share humbles me. I believe this is how God made us and hoped we would always live, live with wide-eyed wonder and joy. What happens, unfortunately, is that we let the experiences of life erode this joy and wonder. To be fully the people God calls us to be, I believe, we are called to recapture some of what we were like many years ago. I am inviting you to enter into your second childhood! Today I wish to talk about the incredible ability children have to give love. We, as adults, struggle, at times, with the doctrine of unmerited grace. A grace and love given freely without conditions. Yet, children do this easily.

The scripture I read this morning is one of my favorites, especially this part, verses 7 and 8 from the Message Translation:

<sup>7-8</sup> My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God *is* love—so you can't know him if you don't love.

The writer of 1 John understands that all love originates with God. This is an idea that we embrace. For after all, we believe God is a God of love. The writer goes even further. He says, "Whoever loves has been born of God and experiences a relationship with God." So, love is more essential for our faith than any creedal formula. We can agree or disagree on a whole host of subjects but they are not essential. Love is. The writer goes so far as to say that if we do not love we ultimately do not know the first thing about God. We can say all the right words but without love they are, as Paul would say, nothing more than a noisy clanging gong. God is love. That is how 1 John defines God. No theological terms like omniscient or omnipresent or ontological reality. God is

love. To know love you must love. If you don't love you don't know God. That is why he states again, "we must love one another." It is absolutely an essential part of our faith.

This is why I am so excited about our intentional welcoming of people. Radical hospitality is not something we do to gain members. It isn't a strategy for church growth. We extend love and welcome to all because that is what it means to be a part of the family of God. Everyone needs to receive love. We also need to give love to others without condition. We work on our radical hospitality because, without a reminder once in a while, we forget to extend a warm welcome. We get busy visiting with our friends or doing the so-called important work of the church and get home and realize we were not as loving as we know God calls us to be. We love all because God is a God of love. Without that, we might as well not open the doors of the church! For God is love and a church without love does not know God!

Today I want to look at the love children freely give as a reminder to us as to how we should be treating all people. Unconditional love is one of the hardest concepts to grasp when it comes to God. We, as adults, tend to put all sort of conditions on that love. I think we do so because we want to feel that God's love for us is special. If it is freely given to all, we wonder if we really matter. We also put conditions on our love towards others. We do it to protect ourselves from getting hurt or being taken advantage of. Loving unconditionally mean a willingness to risk because people are hurting. Children can teach us much about what it means to love the way God does.

They love without prejudice. If you are on social media you often see the picture of a black child and a white child hugging with a caption "Prejudice is learned. You have to be taught it." Children do not have the concept of "in groups" and "out groups." We are taught to be suspicious of people of other races. Cultural bias is something we learn and it is insidious. Most of the time we don't even realize it is there and we rarely believe we are holding some sort of bias towards others. Yet, we are mostly privileged white people. Think about what it must be like to be black in this country and know that you might not be able to wait at a Starbucks for a meeting or use their bathroom? When it happened it created an uproar and so Starbucks changed their policy and had an afternoon for training their employees in being more cultural sensitive. Now that is good

but it is so sad that we would need it in the first place. White nationalism is on the upswing in this country. We hear blanket condemnation of people of certain races or faith from our leaders. We have a problem. We need to see everyone as a child sees people. We need to love all without prejudice or condition. Unconditional love is hard.

I recall a story about a mom with a six-year-old daughter. The daughter wanted her new best friend to come over to play after school. They were born in the same month, liked the color purple and both had a cat. They were so alike that they were almost like sisters her daughter proclaimed. The moms chatted and agreed upon a day. After school when the two girls got in the car the mom was shocked to see that her daughter's new friend was black as they were white. She thought about asking her daughter why she had not mentioned this fact and then celebrated instead. Her daughter saw her friend as a person, a person who shared interest and birthdays with her and the color of her skin did not matter. We need to be childlike and love freely. To embrace people of all ethnicities with love and without prejudice. For this is of God. And remember if we do not love, then we don't know the first thing about God.

A second thing I become aware of when I am around children is that they love without judgement. You can be fat, thin, old, or young and it doesn't matter as long as you are one of the special people in their life. There are no preconditions for sharing love. In contrast, I think about how we often filter our relationships with others. Young people assume things about the more mature. Those mature ones have opinions as to what is wrong with kids. Folks from one part of the country think things about those from another part. City folks look down on us who live in small communities and we shake our heads at those who would live in such urban sprawl. Democrats are angry with republicans and vice versa. We allow all of these superfluous things to create barriers to our accepting and loving others. Unconditional love is hard.

How much better our world would be if we could love like a child. It seems that we learn over and over how businesses end up doing stupid things that social media finds out about and then they have to figure out a way to step back from it. Just the other week a Dunkin Donuts put up a sign in one of their places saying, "If you hear any of our staff yelling in Spanish" contact the management. And you got a free cup of

coffee and a donut for doing so! Once it got out, Dunkin Donuts made sure the sign was removed and apologized for any misunderstanding.

Where do you let bias or opinions get in the way of loving someone? Remember, God is love and we are called upon to love that person unconditionally. If we do not love, we don't know the first thing about God. Unconditional love is hard.

Finally, children expect everyone to love them. In fact, for their own safety we have to teach them to be careful and not be so trusting. That is a necessary accommodation to our society but it is so sad. The more children can see people as being loving, while being safe, the better. I think about Sophi. She has grown up in the churches I have served. She is use to everyone talking to her, caring about her, and loving her. She has a gracious and loving spirit and yes part of that is inherent. But also, some of it is because she has been free to love and be loved with few barriers.

We tend to think about the necessary barriers first and then love. Children teach us the need to love and see where it is absolutely necessary to step back for safety sake. It is hard to move beyond distrust we have been taught. Unconditional love is hard.

Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry who did the wedding of Prince Harry and Megan Markel was just here in Seattle. My sister went to the worship service welcoming him. His message was about the power of love. He said, "We let too many things separate us from others. Jesus said two things are required, love God fully and love our neighbor completely. All the other stuff that divides churches and people is unimportant. Once we truly harness the power of love we can change the world."

Love Freely. It is something the children in my life have taught me and continue to teach me. May we all grow to be childlike, at least in this way!