

Peace Like a River

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Opening Prayer: God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

My dad is one of the most selfless men that I have ever known. Ever since I was little, I have known him to be the man to give the shirt off his back. He would stop traffic to give money to a person that he had never known. He would drop everything to cater to his family. After my mom passed away, it was my dad, my brother and I against the world. He worked long hours to keep us afloat, he supported us in all our extracurricular activities, showed up to every softball game, and loved us unconditionally. I cannot even begin to imagine what it would be like to suddenly become a single father of two child. Now that I am older, it is something that I think about quite often. How did he manage to do all things at once? A father, a mother, a mentor, a caretaker, and a best friend. All while walking in the light of God and being the solid rock that my brother and I needed.

Happy Mother's Day to the woman who walked into our lives with open arms and a heart ready to nourish two children, who initially, were not her own. From the moment that she met my brother and I, she was the one that sat at the dinner table with us to help us with our homework. From a woman to a young girl, she was the model to represent what a strong woman looks like; strong willed, resilient, and outspoken. Before we knew it, she was the one to kiss my brother and I goodbye before getting on the school bus in the mornings. As a young girl, I did

not understand what God's love was supposed to feel like, but I began to understand with every moment at the dinner table, every moment that she let me randomly lay on her chest because I needed it, and with every kiss goodbye.

My GG and my Pawpaw. My second set of parents and my greatest supporters. When my dad was out making money for our family or out taking care of himself, my grandparents were the ones to take us in. It was because of them that I was so involved in everything in school. I was in the sixth grade when I decided that I wanted to become a musician. After school, I would sit in their living room for hours practicing my clarinet. They loved watching me grow into my talent, even if it meant listening to squeak after squawk, or watching me march around their living room like a maniac, trying to memorize my marching routine. Although my dad was able to be two parents in one, they knew that he could not do it on his own. Before my stepmom, Deborah, came into the picture, they were the ones to kiss us goodbye every morning. They were the ones who we had countless sleepovers with. They are the reason that I stand here today with two music degrees and a new job teaching private voice at Clemens High School, in San Antonio.

I would not be who I am today without their love. Aside from being parents and grandparents, they all also have occupations that require them to love and care for strangers. My dad cooks for social events as a side job, but I would say that a lot of his cooking goes to those in need. He gives his own money and hours of his own time to those who are misfortunate, or in most cases, he gives those things up out of the kindness of his heart. Deborah is a physical therapist. From 9 to 5, she is up close and personal with her patience, walking them through PT exercises, and listening to their life stories. In a way, I think that can be considered pastoral work. My grandma, GG, was a community college professor and registered nurse for many

years. She was the one to deliver news and hold the hands of those who were in pain whether she knew them or not. Their love for other people is inspiring.

The first letter from John is a testimony that recalls the God of Light and God of love. 1st John 1: 5 begins the testimony by stating, “God is light. This is the message that we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him, there is no darkness at all. Chapter 4: 7-8 continue by saying, “God is love. Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love, does not know God.” When walking in the light and love of God, we are walking in the testimony that concerns the light and love of Jesus Christ. We love not in word or speech, but in truth and action. We love in the way that we show up for others despite knowing them or not. We love in giving the shirt off our back, showing up to the dinner table, and loving our siblings in Christ. That is living in John’s testimony.

John sums up his affirmations of God’s light and love with our first Gospel reading. “⁹ If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son.” Receiving human testimony is listening to one another regardless of our backgrounds, and in doing that, God’s testimony of light and love are greater. “¹⁰ Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son.” John is saying that those who have faith in God also obtain the unconditional love of God. Those who deny God cannot live in his testimony of true love. “¹¹⁻¹³ And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; Whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

As believers, we strive to follow in Jesus' footsteps. To do that, we are required to love one another. We must love those who look different than us, sound different than us, and believe differently than us. God's love is parental and nurturing. When we have faith, God plays every role all at once. God is our Father who provides for all his children. God is our Mother who meets us at the dinner table and guides us through our homework. God is our extended parent who paves our righteous path and guides us the entire way home. God's love takes us deeper than our feet could ever wonder. God's love extends beyond all borders of our nation and connects us to others whom we are not familiar with. It is what makes us empathetic. Like a vine, God's love is what connects us to the fruit of all creation.

Throughout the first half of the book of John, Jesus commits numerous acts of service out of the kindness of his heart. These are the stories that have taught many people about the purity of his being. For a village, he turns water into wine. In Israel, he claims a new heart for its people. He saves a Samaritan woman by offering her eternal life and love, heals a paralyzed man, feeds thousands of people, walks on water, and heals a blind man. He is the good shepherd of his sheep. In chapter 13, he washes the feet of his Disciples, even the feet of the one who betrays him.

In the following chapters of John, after he has made these miracles happen, Jesus gives a great speech and prays with his Disciples. He tells them that he must go away so that he may renew the world with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that can be at any place, at any time, all the time. He tells them that the Spirit will be the love that lives within his disciples. Jesus explains that the Spirit is what draws his people into the love that resides between the Father and the Son. He claims that his Disciples will be the ones who abide in Spirit's divine love.

From our reading, John 17: 6-13, Jesus then turns to God and says, “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of this world. They were yours; you gave them to me, and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me, and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.”

In every walk of Jesus’ life, he was selfless and loved even those who did not know him. How can we love in the same way that Jesus did? How can we walk further into his light and love? Loving one another in the light of God involves us getting out of our comfort zones, and reaching those who differ from us. We must love the Samaritan woman, who does not know Jesus, just as much as we love the paralyzed man at the pool. This is the love in which my life has been fostered. I have been raised to have a caring heart, one that is empathetic and yearns to reach those who are in need of that unconditional love. Lately, every day I find myself feeling the pain of our Palestinian brothers and sisters. My heart aches for those involved with the war in Gaza and those being cornered in Rafah. Innocent Palestinian people are being left without shelter, food, and clean water. They are being forced to evacuate and live in tents. Some do not even have that. All they can do is pray to see another day because their necessities have been stripped away. I hope that this is not news to anyone; God’s love does not call for war or

genocide of innocent people. The Holy Spirit will never reside in violence or within the hearts of those who condemn murder of any kind.

Jesus says in verse 14, “I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.” When Jesus refers to the world, he is referring to society. Even to those who may not fit into the world, he has given the word. Jesus finishes by saying, “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.”

The three sermons that I have given here, at Austin Heights, have all focused on the love that God is. The Creator is a motherly love. Her love is patient, and her love is kind. Her love is powerful and undying. It is unconditional. Regardless of our faults, God has promised to never leave our side. If we are Christian, we believe that all creation on Earth and beyond, is God’s creation. Regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sex, or sexuality, we are all God’s creation. Throughout the book of John, Jesus shows us how he walks in the light of God’s love. Jesus is our model, and we are the ones who must walk and talk in the way that he does, for we are his disciples. That means we must love our neighbors, keep them close, and never forget to pray for them. It means that we must be the ones to give the shirt off our back when our brothers and sisters are in need light and love. It means we must identify the evil doer, fight injustices, and stand in solidarity with those who seem to not fit into our world.

Look around, breathe, see the state of our world, and understand it for what it is. In America, especially now, we have the privilege of being sheltered from war. As followers of

Christ, we cannot be blind to the destruction of genocide that is taking place outside of our borders. What we can do is continue to educate ourselves, continue to be activists, and continue to pray for peace. You're good at these things, Austin Heights. Be the selfless cook. Be the one who listens to others. Always remember to hold the stranger's hand in the way that we do here every Sunday morning. I love you. May God bring peace to Palestinian people. May God bring peace to everyone who has been affected by the war. May God protect those who are in protest to the war. May God have mercy on the souls of those with blood on their hands and those with blood money in their pockets. May God's will be done.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One true God and Mother of us all.

Amen.