

CRAZY LOVE

1 Timothy 1:12-15 & Luke 15:1-6

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This morning, we are guided in our meditation by two related passages from the New Testament. The first is from Paul's first letter to his protégé, Timothy, [chapter 1, verses 12-15] written in Rome in about 60CE, 30 years after the first Easter, near the end of Paul's life.

The second passage is from the gospel of Luke, written in Antioch, Syria by Paul's friend, Luke to an audience of gentile converts to Christianity in about 70CE, shortly after Paul was arrested and sent to Rome and at the end of the first Jewish Rebellion in Palestine that ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the murder and enslavement of over a million Jews.

First, let's hear the passage from 1 Timothy, again:

I am grateful to Christ Jesus, who has strengthened me because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.

Not because he was righteous was Paul strengthened by Jesus. Not because he was good or worthy or pious, or holy or any of those things, but because he was faithful.

Now, let's hear the passage again from Luke, a parable:

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³So he told them this parable: ⁴Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he finds it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

SAVED

In September of 2010, thirty-three miners were trapped below ground in Chile. They had been trapped for nearly a month and it was feared that it would be Christmas before they could be brought out. So, they organized themselves into a disciplined cadre who worked hard to support each other in what could only be called very trying circumstances. The eldest among them, 62-year-old Mr. Gomez, became their chaplain and counselor, sublimating his own doubts and anxieties, leading prayer and worship time, listening to their fears and worries. Another member of the group became the medical officer, relying on advice from the surface and a few first aid courses he took decades before. Others continued to work, clearing away the debris that fell into their safe room as the new shaft was dug. And eventually, just before Christmas, they walked out of that mine, all of them, alive and in reasonably good condition.

How did they do it? How did they keep from dissolving into their own fears and doubts, giving in to the panic which must have, from time to time, invade their consciousness?

On August 5 of that same year, ten Christians, members of a medical team sponsored by the International Assistance Mission (IAM) were shot to death as they returned to Kabul from a journey into the remote areas of Afghanistan to bring medical aid and supplies to the impoverished people there.

Four days later, Dirk R. Frans, executive director of IAM told the Associated Press that while the organization was devastated by the murders, they had no intention of abandoning their commitment to Afghanistan which had kept them in that country for more than 40 years.

Where does that kind of courage come from? Weren't those people – the missionaries, the ones in the mine – weren't they scared? Are they just naïve and foolish or is there something else, something solid and substantial, down deep in their souls that compels and, at the same time, reassures them?

If we open our eyes, we can see this kind of thing happening, often at the micro level, all around us -- people demonstrating amazing, even outrageous courage and determination, kindness and compassion in the face of overwhelming hatred and violence. What drives the activist who has lived in the inner city his whole life even though he could afford to live in the suburbs? What compels those nuns who run the employment agency for ex-convicts year in and year out for thirty years? What is the source of energy that fuels that octogenarian who volunteers at the local soup kitchen every week as she has for years?

As Delilah asked Samson, we want to ask them, "Where does your strength come from?" Well, it doesn't come from their hair, but maybe the scriptures can point us to a more realistic answer, one that is accessible to all of us.

IN THE SCRIPTURES

The apostle, Paul, was a man of extraordinary energy and creativity. In his first letter to Timothy he shares where his energy came from. It came from Jesus Christ. It is "Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me," he says.

But why? Why did Jesus strengthen him, and how?

Was it because he was handsome? Hardly. Was it because he was pious, had read the Bible from cover to cover, could quote scripture from memory and could pray long and eloquent prayers? Not a chance. Was it because he gave lots of money to the church and sat on all the most powerful boards and committees? Nope.

Paul tells Timothy – and us – that he was strengthened by Jesus not because he (Paul) was good or sinless or pious or handsome or religious. Indeed, he was none of those things. He was given strength because, he says, because he was faithful.

He did what he said he would do. He kept his word, his promises. He honored his pledge – to God and to other people. He hung in there when things got tough. He kept to the path when the footing became unsure. He followed the light even when the light grew dim.

He was faithful.

And the lesson of scripture is that God sees and accepts and rewards faithfulness as though it were goodness and righteousness.

As far back as Genesis, this is one of the most profound and foundational lessons for God's people. It was so in the story of Abraham (Genesis 5:6). Abraham believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

And, now, in Paul's letter we hear it again: "I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful..."

God does not simply acknowledge faithfulness and count it to us as righteousness in some abstract, theological way. God actually rewards our faithfulness as if it were righteousness. The reward for being faithful, for keeping our word and our promises to God and each other is that God strengthens us!

And why does God regard faithfulness so highly? Why does God reward faithfulness as though it were goodness and righteousness? Because God is, himself, faithful. God keeps his promises. And God keeps his promises to us because God loves us. God loves us with a love that is uncritical, unconditional, without limits – with a love that is, well, crazy.

Listen to Luke's version of the parable of the lost sheep if you don't think that's the case.

A shepherd is tending his flock of 100 sheep and discovers that one is missing. Now this shepherd loves his sheep but he doesn't love them as a group, as a flock, he loves them, each one, individually. He knows them by name, as Jesus has said in other parables. He knows their individual habits and tendencies. He knows not just that one of his sheep is missing, he knows which one it is and where this particular sheep is likely to have wandered away from the flock.

So, faithful shepherd that he is, he leaves the other 99 in the field, all by themselves and goes off to find the one that's lost.

And here we can imagine that Jesus smiles at his audience and says, "That's the right thing to do, right? I mean, it's what all of you would do, isn't it?"

And we can imagine those men in his audience looking at each other and asking with their facial expressions, "Is this guy nuts?" Jesus says, "Well, wouldn't you?"

And, as one they all answer, "NO! You don't leave 99 to fend for themselves while you look for one that's lost. That's crazy."

And Jesus, still smiling, says, “Exactly. It’s crazy. And that’s the way God loves each of you. With love that is so complete, so profound, so broad, so deep that it’s, well, crazy!”

SOME CRAZY LOVES

Dashrath Manjhi, a destitute person in Gehlour, a small village in India lost his wife when he could not take her to the doctor after she fell off of a cliff. For the next 22 years, every day, Dashrath would climb the mountain that kept his wife from making it to the hospital and break rocks at the top. Some said he had lost his mind from grief and was punishing the mountain others just called him a pitiful ‘psychopath’. But, after 22 years of breaking stones, he invited people from the town to come up to the top of the mountain with him. There he showed them a flat road paved with crushed stone, about 500 feet long and 30 feet wide, that crested the mountain and connected the village to the nearby city. For all those years and through all that work, his only motive had been to provide the people of his village with access to medical services so that nobody would lose someone they loved as he had loved her.

Altruism is when you help somebody else at a cost to yourself. So, you're sacrificing for another; you're taking a risk or suffering pain.

Angela Simpson lives in Albany, New York. She’s 46 years old. Angela is a graphic artist. She is also an extraordinary altruist. Back in 2010, Angela donated one of her kidneys to an unknown recipient.

The only thing she knew about the recipient was that she was a female and she was residing in Bakersfield, California.

The surgery to remove Angela's kidney occurred at a transplant hospital in New York City and it was shipped to California immediately after it was extracted.

NPR Reporter Michell Trudeau says that Angela's altruistic act begs the question why would someone donate a perfectly healthy part of their body to a total stranger, go through the risk of major surgery and do it willingly - even happily - for no pay, no remuneration and anonymously? Here's how Angela explains her decision:

“At that time in my life, I was 42 years old. I was very single. I had no children; you know, very, very fortunate - loved my life. But I really felt like I would question often what is my purpose? So, when I heard about the critical need for kidney donations - over 100,000 people in the U.S. today are waiting for a kidney transplant. To really be able to help somebody unconditionally was, like, an awe moment.”

So, she did it, she says, simply because she could.

Professor Abigail Marsh has her own story of altruism, too.

She was 20 years old, and driving home to her parent's house in Tacoma, Washington when a freak highway accident put her car into a spin and it stalled in the fast lane of the highway. A stranger stopped, dodged through traffic, helped her to safety saving her life and then

disappeared. A true altruist - risking his own life to help someone he didn't know and would never see again.

That experience propelled Abigail Marsh toward her professional career. She stayed in college, got her Ph.D. and, today is one of the world's leading researchers of altruism. She currently teaches at Georgetown University, where she also studies what she calls extraordinary altruists - most recently, a study of 19, including Angela, from around the country who donated a kidney to a stranger.

"We put them through all kind of tests," she says. "Psych testing, brain imaging studies, extensive background profiles, etc. But, says Marsh, "Most of the test that we did didn't show any differences between the altruistic donors and people who had not been donors."

All were pretty normal - except for a tiny difference in a part of our brain called the amygdala, an almond-shaped cluster of nerves; it's our emotional radar. And it was significantly larger in altruists compared to those who'd never donated an organ. Additionally, Marsh reports that the amygdala in altruists is supersensitive to fear or distress in another person's face. They all showed a very specific increase in amygdala activity in response to another person's fear.

God, it would seem builds some people to be supersensitive to the fears of other people and gives them the ability to reach out and respond to that person's fear.

I know, it's just crazy, right?

LEARNING ALTRUISM

We live in a culture of success.

Television preachers and pundits constantly remind us that God wants us to all be happy and successful and if you aren't both of these things you are probably doing something wrong.

But, in scripture, God seems to be fairly indifferent to how successful we are in earthly terms. God isn't really much concerned with what kind of car we drive – unless it's wasteful and extravagant in the face of suffering. God doesn't seem to care how many rooms our houses have – unless there are homeless people about who have no rooms at all. And God doesn't seem to be as concerned with how much money we make as how much we keep for ourselves and how much we give to the work of God's kingdom.

Over and over, the witness of scripture seems to be that God doesn't reward the righteous with success at the end of the journey. **God rewards the faithful with strength for the journey.**

A couple who is faithful to each other in marriage for many years and is able to provide strength for each other in their old age. Those who persist in their righteous cause even in the face of overwhelming opposition come to know success because they were strengthened to continue when they might otherwise have given up.

How many souls have been renewed, we ask. How many lives have been saved? How many marriages have been reinforced and how many inventions have come into being to make our lives healthier and safer because someone, facing difficulty and even danger, **remained faithful** to their calling and their cause.

AMEN