

I begin with a personal confession. You may or may not identify with *my* journey, but I have a feeling many of you will identify with the struggle. The confession?

I spent most of my growing up years running away from God and from anything related to organized religion...not something our son chose to do... My rationale was relatively simple...It was because of my image of God. God was judgmental...My job or goal was to be good...good enough to win and maintain God's acceptance and approval...or at least avoid punishment.

Well, that was impossible. Early on I knew I was not the kind of person God wanted me to be...I was creatively naughty so, the best way to avoid being zapped or punished by God was to hide....to avoid God at all costs. Churches were a particularly dangerous place, as my understanding was that the church was where God lived....Why would I want to go visit the place where this God-judge was waiting for me. God was not loving....God was to be feared....God only liked good little girls and boys...and I knew what I had been doing... and it wasn't good.... I was convinced I would never pass the "God-test."

Over time I struggled with the distinction between Jesus and God. On those rare occasions that I attended Sunday School, I heard good things about Jesus. We even learned songs about Jesus.... "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so..." So... eventually I somehow grew to trust Sunday School...It was the Jesus place, the safe place....the big church though was not so safe...that was God's house. Jesus loves me...but God?...God has all kinds of commandments that I knew I wasn't keeping....heck, I couldn't even remember them all.

And then, just to confuse me more....I heard church people talk about the HOLY GHOST....Was that God, or my friend Jesus...or someone

else entirely... Having a vivid very active imagination... I was not at all convinced that a ghost, even a *holy* ghost was someone or something I wanted to get to know. All of this uncertainty about God, or what theologians call the nature of God was a bother...who was God, and what did God expect of me?

I don't recall ever reading the Gospel of John until I was in college....I suppose I had heard parts of it...but I had not heard the wonderful news it contains for me....for all of us. God cannot be the bad guy I so vividly had created in my imagination....God is all about love and we heard the evidence of that in today's scripture.... "For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes... may not perish but may have eternal life..." God so loved the world...God took action to make a difference in how we relate to God and one another.

*Will you join me in prayer?* O loving God...we confess you are a mystery...At times we feel so close to you...yet, at other times thinking about you is confusing and tends to make you seem distant...Be with us this morning as we worship and grow in our understanding of who you are and who we are each called to be as individuals and as the community of faith, Ridge United Methodist Church. O loving God...use me now, your humble servant to speak a fresh word to your people and do help me stay out of your way....in Jesus' name...amen.

If God is love....If God is love what difference does it make? What difference does it make to any of us...today? Does it make a difference in who we are and how we respond to one another if we comprehend God's loving nature?

The writer of the fourth Gospel...the "different" Gospel has much to say about who God is revealed to be....John....the last of the New Testament Gospels to be written....written several decades after Mark and Matthew and Luke...

Because of the time of the Gospel's composition it is improbable that John the apostle...the son of Zebedee, the beloved disciple wrote it....even though for centuries church leaders argued for this understanding to give the gospel what is called apostolic authority....

Regardless of the author, the writer of John is not as interested in telling a historical narrative of Jesus as he is in conveying or proclaiming Jesus' identity...his goal is persuasion, not a chronicle of events.

John is a story teller...and in the particular scripture today we encounter Nicodemus...trying to understand who God is. Nicodemus...perhaps a first century representative of "everyman" as he struggles to comprehend that which is incomprehensible...how can we be born again? How can we begin to live life differently...radically differently?

The key verse is composed of words that move us all from *fear* of God to *faith* in God....and an understanding of God's vast love for all of humankind.

"God so loved the world....

God did not give us Jesus to condemn us, rather God offers Christ to make God's love tangible....so we might receive God's light....so we can fully comprehend God's love...

So we *accept* God *as* love.

"If God is love..." This sermon is a continuation of the two sermons Jeff preached from the book, "If Grace is True" I don't know how strongly Jeff recommended these books, "If Grace is True" and "If God is Love" to you...but I strongly suggest you consider reading them and discussing them in small groups....The books are both very Wesleyan. "If God is love" suggests we are all in the process of growing in faith as we discover and rediscover God's grace in our ungracious world.....

God loves us where ever we are on that journey....our faith journey and moves us and guides us on.

The authors, Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland, explain God's acceptance of us saying, "God knows we must crawl before we walk and fall many times before we can run. God understands that some of us begin our spiritual journeys on crippled legs." I believe God literally carries us in God's arms until we can walk on our own once again.

God so loved the world...Jesus provides for humankind unique and unprecedented access to God. Through Christ God reveals how we are to relate to one another. It was and continues to be a radical way of thinking....

Power is not to be used to dominate and control...Rather, power...true power is achieved only in service. The disciples were told..."whoever wishes to become great among you must be a servant of all..." Jesus wanted his disciples to approach religion...their understanding of God... as an opportunity for intimate relationship and service ...not as a way to manipulate the culture or as a claim of prestige and dominance over the others.

If God is love....we do not need to hide from God in fear....and, we should not be living for God's rewards. Unfortunately this idea of God rewarding the good folks and punishing the bad....just won't go away. This reward-based theology....as well as the theology of prosperity....has the audacity to suggest that God abundantly rewards us for being good....The very popular current prosperity theology suggests we get pay raises and win elections....and defeat our enemies...when we do what is pleasing to God. This reward theology continues to scam thousands of people every day...They are convinced God will reward them...if they phone in their pledges with their credit card number and give enough money to God and God's causes.

Doing so is nothing short of manipulation in God's name. God is cannot be so narrowly defined...God is love. God will not ever run out of love or time to be in relationship with every single one of us...Being in

relationship with God is not about earning...anything. We respond...joyously to all God does for us....and with us.

If God is love... the point is not just what happens later...it is about what happens now. Image what that means...image what you as a community of believers...the community called Ridge United Methodist Church...Image what you are being empowered and challenged to do if God is love...If God loves us so much that God gave us Jesus Christ to show us how to live and be in relationship.... we will begin to live as new people...we will be born again...now. And being born again...we will live differently we will become radical lovers....just like Jesus...Imagine.

Love ...real love will be realized...It will be a reflection of ....a glimpse of ...God's love. I want to show you what I think that kind of love looks like...an unselfish committed love of service...a devoted love. The clip you will be seeing is from the movie, *The Notebook*...a movie adapted from the book written by Nicholas Sparks.

Noah, the gentleman, you will see as the scene opens lives in a nursing home...He has just returned from the hospital, after a heart attack...His wife Allie lives in the same care facility...in a different wing...she has dementia, likely Alzheimer's....and at times is not able to recognize or remember Noah...It breaks his heart but he never gives up on her...he just keeps loving her .... As you watch...look for God's love expressed through Noah,...and Allie...and the nurse.

Play the DVD...final chapter of *The Notebook*.

Allie was afraid...and wanted to know what would happen when she couldn't remember anything...Noah promises he will remember for her and will never leave her. This is a glimpse of God's love.

When Allie and Noah were young and struggled to make their relationship work....one between two people from totally different “sides of the town...

Noah wrote this note to Allie...

“The best love is the kind that awakens the soul and makes us reach for more....it plants a fire in our hearts and brings peace to our minds.”...I love those images...it awakens the soul ...plants a fire....and brings peace.

Noah was talking about romantic love....but I firmly believe that is a perfect description of the loving relationship God desires...with each of us. God initiates with us a love that will awaken our souls...planting a fire in our hearts...and yet brings peace to our minds...through God’s son..Jesus.

God will seek us out...even during the night...even when God has to manipulate around obstacles...Even when we are separated by dementia...even when we are afraid.

What difference does it make....if God *is* love....?

When we realize it...when we accept it...when we no longer hide from God in fear....we will begin to live our lives selflessly...like Noah, and the nurse...like Jesus.

And when we do...God will not be an abstraction, but one who loves us fully and extravagantly. Image how we will be transformed...

God so loved the world....God so loves the world...even us.  
Thanks be to God. Amen.