

Today's worship and sermon continue our focus on the Grace Covenant around which our congregation gathers. Today, we focus on our commitment to be an inclusive fellowship:

We covenant to love one another as God in Christ has loved us (John 13:34). We are an inclusive fellowship, welcoming all persons without regard to the outward distinctions by which the world separates, classifies, and discriminates.

This week, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released the second half of its *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*. The first half, released in February, revealed the changing face of religion in our country as more than a quarter of those surveyed reported having left the faith of their childhood to join another religion or no religion. This week's report seems to indicate a significant trend toward religious toleration both between and within faith traditions.

Telephone interviews conducted in English and Spanish of more than 35,000 adults found that although more than half of Americans rank the importance of religion very high in their lives, attend religious services regularly and pray daily, nearly three-quarters say they believe that many faiths besides their own can lead to salvation. Some 57 percent of evangelical Christians, 79 percent of Catholics, and more than 80 percent of Jews, Hindus and Buddhists agreed with the statement "many religions can lead to eternal life," as did more than half of Muslims. And more than two-thirds of those affiliated with a religious tradition agreed that there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of their faith, a pattern that duplicated in all religions except for Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses.

Do these indications of growing openness within and between religious groups signify, that, thanks to the great diversity of American society, we are learning from one another and about one another to the extent that we no longer reject one another? Is it the case, as one commentator suggests, that "it is hard to hold a strongly sectarian view when you work together and your kids play soccer together"? Or is it a matter, as a seminary professor proposes, that the survey results merely indicate that people are not very well educated in their faith and are expressing immature theological points of view? Is this new openness a form of "bland secularism" where "anything goes"? Or does it truly indicate a growing maturity and security in religious faiths dominated less by fear than respect and openness, not only to our neighbors, but to the mystery, immensity and freedom of the God we worship as well?

Who is God? A professor, seeking to introduce her class to the spiritual development of children, assigned her students the task of interviewing children about their views of God. One student returned to share his experience with a grade school child. When the child responded to the student's question with the response, "God is like my principal," the student immediately thought, "How sad. This child thinks of God as the final enforcer of rules." However, the child continued. "She [the principal] goes around the schoolyard at recess, making sure everyone gets a chance to play."

Our view of God is critical for everything else about our faith. If God is a harsh, punitive force in our lives, our acceptance of ourselves and others is almost impossible. If, on the other hand, God manifests love and concern for, not just some, but all the children on the playground, our openness, our concern for others is not optional. "We," in the words of Saint Augustine, "imitate whom we adore."

Our Grace Covenant proclaims, "We are an inclusive fellowship, welcoming all persons without regard to the outward distinctions by which the world separates, classifies, and discriminates." It may be there is no more decisive statement of our peculiar identity as a church than those very words. Yet, those words, influenced as they are by our having previously encountered faith traditions that seem more occupied with crafting words of exclusion than inclusion, do not merely spring from our sociological perspective. They are rooted in a prior commitment of faith, which precedes every other statement we make about our relationship to one another and the world in which we live: "We covenant to love one another as God in Christ has loved us."

We love because God first loved us. "What sort of face hath love?" the great Augustine asked. Just this, says the writer of First John. God takes the initiative. The definition of love proceeds from God, for God is love. Speaking to a situation of conflict in which some in the church are creating schism, dividing Christ's body into warring camps, even as others outside the church spew derision and contempt, John does not conjure up an abstract, romantic, merely emotive definition of love. John points to the love of God made plain in the concrete, historical person of Christ. If you want to know what love is, if you want to know how you should then be and act, look at God's love in the face of Jesus Christ.

God's love, John contends, creates a whole new reality. "We love because God first loved us" (4:19). Society or "the world," John would say, seeks to dictate whom we accept, love and hate. Reality redefined in Christ, however, demands that we look again. Love modeled on the love of God in Christ says that even those—or

perhaps, more accurately, *especially* those—that the world gives us a free pass to hate, exclude or merely ignore, we must now view through the inclusive love of God in Christ.

Love is not passive, but active. Present in Christian scriptures more often as a verb than a noun, Christian love speaks to God's creative action within us and through us, moving us beyond the obvious and expected to affect new realities and new expectations previously undreamed.

In 1963 our nation passed the centennial year of President Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Yet that centennial summer saw Bull Connor turning his fire hoses and police dogs on civil rights demonstrators in the streets of Alabama. Medgar Evers, a thirty-seven-year-old NAACP field secretary in Jackson, Mississippi, was murdered on the front porch of his house. Riots tore through cities across the nation as we seemed to stand on the brink of a racial civil war. In a time that seemed devoid of hope, Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to address the thousands gathered for the March on Washington. Addressing in no uncertain terms America's default on the promissory note issued 100 years earlier and recalling the "sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent," this minister of Christ called the nation beyond the valley of despair to a dream "rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all are created equal." King's resounding call to let freedom ring echoed through the valleys and hills of this nation, bouncing off the mountains of the Alleghenies, Rockies, Stone Mountain and Lookout Mountain, raising the hopes and expectations of a people and effecting change never before dreamed possible.

And so it is with the love of God in Christ. Barriers of prejudice, hatred and fear seem insurmountable. Challenged day-to-day and year-to-year and generation-to-generation by the inclusive love of God, barriers are lifted. And that, day-to-day and year-to-year and generation-to-generation is our unrelenting mission as the people of God.

"We are an inclusive fellowship, welcoming all persons without regard to the outward distinctions by which the world separates, classifies, and discriminates." May God give us the courage, the determination and the day-to-day persistence to let it be so.