

A student recently asked me if the love of God was still for people who didn't know about God or Jesus. How would they know about God and all the commandments and the love of God if they had never heard of it before? Which is a great question, and as I responded to this student too, others may have a different way of answering this question than I do. But what it boils down to is the old saying and hymn lyric - they will know we are Christians by our love.

There are many different ways in which people feel called to follow Jesus, to become a Christian. Some of us felt the calling of the Christian life from our earliest moments, having been brought up in the church and surrounded by loving community and family who nurtured love for God within us too. Some of us may have grown up in the church but didn't feel much of a connection, and instead found faith later on in life. And some of us may be very new to the church and to the Christian faith. All of these paths are certainly gifts and have their strengths and growth areas, and all of them are certainly worthy of a Christian life here and now.

And no matter how we found our way to Christ and to our faith, the way we live it out is truly what makes it the Christian life. The way we live out our faith is to live in a way that embodies love, first given to us by God and nurtured in hope and light by Jesus the beloved Son.

In our Gospel text today, we learn that Jesus does not discriminate against who does good deeds in his name or not, or who may or may not know the Christian faith itself. He in fact affirms the good deeds people do, everything from handing a thirsty person a cup of water to straight up casting out demons, whether or not they are specifically following him in the same way the disciples are. He does not stop and ask, "hey, are you a Christian? Do you believe I am the Messiah? Do we agree on all these points of faith and life?" before healing someone, or feeding someone, or truly living out the actions of love and grace that he embodies as the Son of God. He just does it. The love God has for all of humanity is greater than any one specific part of someone's belief or knowledge or identity - God will never give up on humanity. And so it is true for Jesus too.

Even now, when we do good and kind and loving things for other people, we don't generally explicitly say, "I'm doing this because God loves me and calls me to do this by the power of His Son Jesus!". You certainly could if that's what you felt called to do in the moment, and it may prove to be a healthy and beautiful point of connection with someone else, but not even Jesus does this every time he or a disciple does something in service of a neighbor. It's about our character, about the type of person we are both called to and desire to be - a person centered on the love of God and love of neighbors.

We find great peace and great blessing when our focus is on the ways we can show up and embody love given to us by God and for the sake of others, rather than always focusing on ourselves or self-serving interests. In our James reading today, we hear that, "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven."

And in the Psalm today, we hear, "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear (or awe) of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether."

Following the laws, the commandments of God revives our soul, brings wisdom, rejoices our hearts, and enlightens our eyes. What an absolute gift and blessing such a life is. No matter where we are in life, what kinds of hardships or struggles or ailments we face, turning our attention and actions towards God and the love God has for us will certainly help. This focus and embodiment centers us on the God who created us, and out of great love died and rose again, defeating death and the grave, for us. And now we are empowered to be that risen body of hope and new life not only for ourselves but for the people around us too. And these laws of God, these commandments, these greatest things we can do above all else, are

to love God and love our neighbors. On these two things hang all the laws and gospels.

Especially as we welcome new members into our church community here at Mt. Zion today, we celebrate the roots of Christian life in love. We celebrate all the ways we are both able to serve others and be served by our fellow people in many different situations. Whether we are the one who is sick or the one caretaking and anointing with oil, whether we are the one who is suffering or the one who is praying over and with our beloveds in pain, we are connected to God through it all. We are living out the calling to embody the Christian faith, the Christian love in our deeds, our actions, as well as our thoughts and words. It is because of the love and grace God has first given us that then we are compelled to live a life rooted in love and service of others and God.

And may you, dear friends, on your journey as the body of Christ be blessed in your embodiment of God's love. May you be strengthened, your soul revived, and your heart rejoice with your actions of love for God and neighbors. May the people around you know you are a Christian by your love. Thanks be to God, Amen.