

Easter Life: In a Word, Love
Psalm 98:1-9 and John 15:9-17
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
May 6, 2018
Rev. Glen Bell

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room!
And heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing!
And heaven and heaven and nature sing!*

Joy to the world! That is the promise of Psalm 98. Isaac Watts' beloved hymn is all about God come down to earth.

God is coming! God is coming! So we sing the great good news. We lift our voices with fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains. As the psalm writer says, "Let the sea roar! Let us all lift our voices! Let the floods clap their hands! Let the hills sing for joy!"

This is no ordinary day, no ordinary song. God has done marvelous things. The Lord God is come to earth. So we sing a new song. We make a joyful noise. We sing the wonders of God's love.

Every day – every single day – is a reminder and remembrance of God's love, for God has broken into our lives and world. Every day is Easter. Every day is resurrection day, when we praise the incarnate Lord, come back to life.

Ismael Garcia taught theology and ethics for two decades at Austin Seminary. He writes, "The Christ event is marvelous and unexpected. [It is] God's steadfast love for us. God is not distant, but makes the divine self-present within history and creation."

God shows up and loves you when you have aced that test or celebrated that anniversary or made it all the way through or received that diploma.

God shows up and loves you when you have failed for the third time or fallen down on the job or gotten lost in the darkness or forgotten you are a child of God.

Our lives reflect great joy because our lives are rooted in God's love.

The word for us today is love. "Abide in my love," Jesus commands, the love that you have seen between the Son and almighty God. Jesus says, The same way that we love one another, divine Father and divine Son, is the way you can experience love too.

Then Jesus invites us to *love one another*, to love the sisters and brothers around us. This is a difference, one commentator points out, between what we hear in Matthew 22, *love your neighbor*, and what we hear in Luke 6, *love your enemies*. No, here in John's Gospel our charge is to love those who journey alongside us, those faithful ones who walk beside us, those sitting on the pews and seats and tables near us just now.

God invites us to put flesh and bones to our love for each other.

God invites and commands us to do something breathtaking. The Lord invites us to be friends.

Do you hear Jesus? "Love one another, just like I have loved you. If you do this, you are my friends." He doesn't call us servants or disciples any longer; he calls us friends. "I call you friends," he says, "because I have told you everything."

That's a friend, right? A real friend, someone with whom we can share and cry, someone we can tell everything, even when we are feeling foolish or down or really messed up.

Well, there are friends – and then there are *friends*. David Cunningham teaches at Hope College in Michigan. He goes all the way back to Aristotle to teach us what Jesus means about friends and friendship.

“Aristotle,” he says, “describes three kinds of friendship. Some people are our friends because it is useful. They enable us to make business connections or get into a particular social group. Other friendships are pleasurable. We cultivate these because we enjoy them.

“But the third kind of friendship,” he says, “the best kind, is *for the sake of the friendship itself*. This level of friendship requires *physical presence* and *availability*. These friendships are the most formative. A true friend, who loves as God loves, will, over time, teach us *how to love as God loves*.”

That’s it. That’s it exactly. That is what brings everything together today. We make a joyful noise; we remember and are reminded, because God has come physically into our world in Christ. We are invited to put our flesh and bones to love, to love each other through the nitty gritty, the down and dirty, because God in Christ did just that, come to earth, the divine self here within history and creation.

For us, it is only when we show up – and open our hearts – that we learn to love as God loves.

Let me give you two examples. The first example is in front of you this morning. We are celebrating communion on this Lord’s Day. We are receiving the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. We are reminded and we remember that Jesus Christ gave himself away, that his body was broken and his life was poured out because of his great love for us. He did it all because he was and is truly our friend.

Today I invite you to come, to come with open hands and open hearts to this table, to receive this gift of life, life broken for our sakes, life poured out for all the world. In your heart, prepare him room. Invite him in again to change and heal and strengthen.

The second example takes a little more effort. This afternoon at 12:30 pm, show up in the Forum, the big room on the second floor of our educational building. We are going to be welcoming a lot of guests for a reception, the students from Brentwood Elementary School, who are having their student art show right here at First Presbyterian Church. Some of these students don’t have much family or many friends to “ooh” and “aaah” over their artwork. That’s why I need you. I need you to befriend these elementary school students and their parents. I need you to put flesh and bones on your love for them. I need you to make a joyful noise as you “ooh” and “aaah.”

We show up for friendship. We show up with our physical presence and availability. We show up, and over time, we learn better how to love as God loves.

Father Gregory Boyle is the founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, California, the largest gang intervention, rehabilitation and reentry program in the world. In his recent book, *Barking to the Choir*, he shares the story of Chuy.

“Chuy is texting me,” he writes. “He needs help getting a refrigerator.

“For a long time Chuy had been a big, bad gang member and drug dealer. He began in our program in janitorial services, then he worked in our tattoo removal department. After his eighteen months were up, he moved beyond us, having found a good-paying job with the help of our employment services department. On his last day, he asked to address everyone gathered at our morning meeting. He directed his remarks to all the trainees present.

“‘All of you,’ he began, ‘are diamonds covered in dust.’

“He choked up a bit. ‘You . . . you can wipe your dust off here.’

“Now it’s Saturday, months later, and I’m running from mass to talk to baptism. Chuy’s a persistent fellow, and after a few messages I text back he should meet me in the fridge section of Sears at 4:30.

“I find him there, right on time, when I arrive. I watch him and the refrigerator salesman interact, and before long, they make a deal and arrange the delivery.

“I drive Chuy home and as we pull up in front of his apartment he tells me that lately he’s ‘been having one-on-ones with . . . you know . . . God.’

“‘I don’t understand it,’ he says as he turns and looks at me. ‘The Dude shows up.’ I find this pretty humorous and chuckle at first. Then I see that Chuy is as serious as can be. ‘I mean . . . why would he do that?’ he asks, allowing his tears free passage. ‘After all the bad I’ve done, why would he show up?’”

Jesus shows up. Then we show up, because Jesus showed up first. We show up for others, because it is only with our physical presence and availability – our blood and sweat and tears and open heart – that we can befriend others in Christ’s name.

So show up. Show up every day and befriend each other. Show up and make a joyful noise. Show up and put flesh and bones on your love.