

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Following Jesus 101: God's Love
January 5, 2020
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Psalm 25:1-10
John 3:16-21

I want to begin this New Year with a quick survey. How many of you have ever used Map Quest? Google Maps? Apple Maps or any other GPS mapping system? Good. How many of you have ever had it get you to where you were supposed to go? Even better. One of the interesting things about these programs is that in order to get you to where you want to go, they need to know your starting location. Map Quest in particular asks you to specify your starting location. You can choose work, home, current location or any other you desire. It makes sense to do this or else the directions might not be of much use. And so, this morning I want to begin with that question of where do we want to start? Where do we want to begin our Following Jesus journey? I say that because the starting point of this journey will determine how we understand what it means to follow Jesus. Where then shall we start? I believe that we need to start with God, or more specifically with the love of God. Whether it is Genesis, the letters of Paul or the writings of John Calvin, the beginning point of following Jesus is always God and God's love. So what does God's love look like? It looks like the love of parent to child. It is not friend to friend love, or child to parent love. It is the love of a parent for a child, which is comprised of two parts. The first part is to protect the children from harm. The second part is to guide the children into becoming their best selves; reaching their full potential. I got a taste of what this looks like on our flight from Detroit to Nashville, this last week from a man I will call Window Seat Guy.

Window Seat Guy was one of those people whom we have all met, who will tell you their entire life story before you arrive at your destination. This is Window Seat Guy's story. He had grown up in a blue-collar family and had come to Detroit as a teen to work with his Uncle in the asphalt business. He was quickly fired from that but found a job on the line with GM. Retiring after 20 years, he then became an HVAC tech. Along the way way he had eight children; seven boys and then a girl. He told us that he understood his job as a parent to first say no for his children to things that would hurt them, until they could say no for themselves. In other words, to protect them. His second obligation was to guide them into becoming mature adults. His method for doing this including contacting the teachers of each of his children at the beginning of the school year to make sure that the teachers knew that they had their back and would make sure that his children did what they were told to do. He would also drop by the school to make sure his kids were behaving. When they were not, he had them do things such as pick up trash out front of their school. If his children missed the bus, they had to walk...with him in the car following them. When they missed curfew, they had to sleep in the car in the drive way. He checked their homework every night to ensure that it was done. The results? All eight graduated from high school. Six graduated from college. One has a masters and one just graduated from law school. Parental love; protect and guide.

We can see that this is the kind of love God offers throughout the scriptures and particularly in the Psalm we read this morning. In Psalm 25 we see the writer asking God for protection and guidance. *“Do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame.”* This desire for protection is at the heart of the Biblical story, whether it was keeping Abraham safe on his journey or freeing the people from bondage. The covenant relationship is that God will be the protector of the people. At the same time, we can see the Psalmist asking for guidance. *“Make me know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me... Good and upright is the Lord, therefore he instructs sinners in the way; he leads the humble in what it with, he teaches the humble the way...”*. And God does all of this because of God’s *“hesed”* or steadfast love. *“Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord and of your steadfast love, for they have been of old. Do not remember my transgressions; but according to your steadfast love remember me...all the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness...”* The writer understood clearly the nature of God’s love as a love that protects and guides even when the children do not always follow.

It is this love, this *“hesed,”* this steadfast love, that is the reason that God sent the only son into the world. It is for this reason that God, the Word, became flesh and dwelt among full of grace and truth. *“For God so loved the world that he sent his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him...but those who do what is true come to the light so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”* In other words, once again we see God’s love being poured out for us through Jesus. In Jesus God has come to protect the world; to protect the world from its greatest enemy, death itself. That by breaking the power to death Jesus, for God, makes possible lives fully lived without fear. At the same time Jesus come as the one who not only teaches the way of God as an abstract concept but embodies it in all that he does, and then he passes this way of love on to us through the gift of the Spirit. It is Jesus who brings us, as John says, out of the darkness and into the light of life. Our journey of following Jesus then begins here...with the love of God for the world as lived and breathed through God’s covenant faithfulness that culminates in the birth, life’s death and resurrection of Jesus.

My challenge to you this week then is to ask yourselves, where have I seen, or perhaps where do I see, God at work protecting me and guiding me in my life? Where do I see God saying no for me until I know how to say know, and where do I see God bringing me to the light and out of the darkness? Then remember those and give thanks.