

Scripture Readings and Sermon

May 15, 2022 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Revelation 21:1-6

Just as the first book of the Bible, Genesis, begins with the creation and God walking in the Garden with Adam and Eve, the Bible ends with a "new" creation and God's return. If sin is the literal distance we are from where we are meant to be, then the fact that "the home of God is among mortals" and "He will wipe every tear from their eyes" means that there is no more sin. All separation has been removed. The tree of life has been replaced the spring of the water of life. In John, Jesus tells the woman at the well that the spring of the water of life comes from him. In the beginning, all life came from the Word and all life will return to the Word. Jesus is the Alpha and Omega which means that God initiates all things and God brings all things eventually to a good ending. If the ending is not good, then it is not the ending. The old way of thinking about life and death will end and all separations will be healed. This is the ultimate message of Revelation. There will be tribulation and there will be periods of suffering but in the end everything will be made whole as it was always meant to be.

Revelation 21:5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

How do you react to change?

Do you prefer change that actually changes things back to the way they were?

Would it make a difference if you thought that it was God doing the change?

If God is sovereign, then isn't all change eventually working toward God's plan?

How do we find blessings even in the midst of change?

Commentary on John 13:31-35

This text is so familiar that the context is often forgotten. The "new commandment" is viewed by some as a restating in John's style the answer to "What is the greatest commandment?" found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke (which together are called the Synoptic Gospels). There are two striking differences, however, between John's version and the Synoptic Gospels. The first is the context. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is answering a philosophical or legal question put to him by lawyer (Luke 10:25, Matthew 22:35) or a scribe (Mark 12:30). In John, however, Jesus telling them to love unconditionally (agape) right after Judas has left to betray not only Jesus but all of them. It is one thing to talk about love in the abstract and another to speak of loving someone who is betraying a trust built over sharing the past several years with. The second thing that sets this apart is that the Synoptic Gospels quote Deuteronomy by saying that we should love others as we love ourselves. While we love ourselves to various degrees, John makes it clear that we should unconditionally love as Jesus has loved us. This places the bar much higher especially when Jesus' love was willing to offer forgiveness even to those who were torturing and killing him.

John 13:34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

How do you imagine Jesus loved his disciples?

Do you think that his love resembled the love described in Paul's letter to the Corinthians?

Are you living up to Jesus' command?

Would people know you were a Christian by who you love or hate?

Can "tough" love be an excuse not to unconditionally love?

Does loving the sinner and hating the sin really work in a relationship?

Commentary on Acts 11:1-18

Even though Jesus gave the apostles the Great Commission (Matthew) to go into all nations,

the assumption was that in order to believe in Jesus a person must first submit themselves to Jewish law. As Paul would later argue, the Law convicts and the Spirit saves. Without the conviction of the Jewish law to point out our unrighteousness in the light of God's righteousness, there could be no true repentance. This presented a major stumbling block to the spread of the Good News beyond synagogues. To open up the way to the conversion of the world, God initiated two different stories that would eventually lead to the Jerusalem council recorded in Chapter 15. The first story was the conversion of Paul and his early ministry with Barnabas (9:1-30, 11:25-30, 12:24-15:3). The second story was Peter's struggle with God concerning ministry to Gentiles (10:1-11:18, 12:1-19). The section today is a retelling of Chapter 10 in which Peter argues that not accepting Gentiles would be to oppose God since God has given them the gift of repentance without the Law. Peter's imprisonment and God's miraculous "prison break" in Chapter 12 strengthens Peter's position in the church and validates his position. When the issue comes to a head in the Jerusalem council over circumcision, both Peter and Paul end up on the same side and open the way for the church to evangelize the Gentiles. Acts 11:17 If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?

When do our assumptions "hinder God"?

Does our judgment preclude God's grace?

How do we learn to see God in the lives of others?

Why do you think Peter mentions the Holy Spirit so often?

Could the Spirit be the key to accepting people as children of God.

Reflection on Revelation 21:1-6, John 13:31-35, Acts 11:1-18

Sermon "A New Love"

If the greatest commandment is to love God and love our neighbor, than why did Jesus say that "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another"? The key is not that we should love but how we should love. The second great commandment is to love you neighbor as yourself. This is the basis of the golden rule, "do unto others as you would have them do to you". It can also be found in "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others". In each of these examples, there is a reciprocal relationship being described. By doing good, forgiving, and loving others, than we will in turn receive goodness, forgiveness, and love. The Old Testament understanding is based one this idea of a reciprocal relationship. The problem, however, is that while God stayed good, forgiving, and loving, humanity took this as an excuse to be the opposite to one another. Our failure to love ourselves resulted in our failure to properly love our neighbor or even God. Our own sinfulness makes a truly loving reciprocal relationship an ideal for Hallmark movies rather than a daily reality.

Jesus came to establish a new type of relationship not based on our ability but on his grace. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." We love because we have first been loved by Jesus. God puts a healthy love in our hearts through the Holy Spirit so that we can then share that love with others. In order to obey this new commandment, we must first accept God's powerful love into our lives. This love begins to drive out selfish love as a poor substitute for the love we find in Christ. This love begins to judge our relationships in which we seek to serve our selves rather than the other. And this love drives us to see the goodness even in those we would otherwise reject. This is what happened to Peter. Peter did not want to go to the Roman soldiers home and baptize his family but God's love compelled him to go.

One day, God's love will fill the world and the former things will pass away. That precious love will wipe every tear from our eyes and fill us with joy. Until that time, we are given the grace of God's love to share unconditionally with all of God's children. If God so loved the world, who are we to hinder that love? When we truly embrace that call to love, the hypocrisy will fall away and the true joy of Christianity will shine forth.