

THE PROMISE OF LOVE

John 1:1-5, 16

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(online worship only)

I lived in Nashville for three years while I was a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School. I've never been much of a country music fan, but there were a lot of fun celebrity sightings in Nashville. One night I met the guy who had written the song some of you will remember which was later used as a commercial for Coke. The song begins, "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony."

One of my seminary classmates grew up in a ritzy Nashville neighborhood next door to this elegant woman named Sarah Cannon. You might remember her as Minnie Pearl.

I lived in a dorm for seminary students right across the street from a place called Close Quarters which was billed as America's only rock-n-roll hotel. We would look out our windows and see limos pull up, dropping people off, picking them up; we'd try to identify them. One was clearly Linda Ronstadt.

Nashville wasn't that big a place then - half a million people - we all knew someone who knew someone famous.

One person we had zero interest in was Dolly Parton. To be perfectly honest, she was the source of jokes in my circle of friends and acquaintances, nothing else.

My opinion of her has since changed. Dramatically and for the better. She seems to be a genuinely humble person, very focused on doing what she can to bring more love into the world. She's not only a shrewd business woman but she is an

remarkable philanthropist. I admire people who have the ability to find ways to give and help which really make a difference. Some people are able to see where the gaps are and fill them. In 1995, Parton started a non-profit organization called The Imagination Library, a literacy program she founded in honor of her own father who grew up in the Smoky Mountains and never learned to read. She saw a need for children whose families couldn't afford books, she knew the importance of having books in the home. Her program now reaches all fifty states and three other countries. The Imagination Library ships one million books free per month. She has given away over 150 million books.

In April of this year, she gave one million dollars to Vanderbilt University Medical Center so they could work with Moderna on trials for the coronavirus vaccine. Some of her fans on Twitter boasted, "Dolly Parton just saved the world." She herself was much more modest, saying, "I'm sure many millions of dollars from many people went into that...But I just felt so proud to have been part of that little seed money that will hopefully grow into something great and help to heal this world." It does seem that her gift arrived at just the right time and place, helping to spur on the research - and Moderna's vaccine was just approved on Friday night.

On one of my recent drives to Columbus to visit my parents, I listened to a podcast in which Brene Brown interviewed Dolly Parton, and here's what Dolly had to say about how she understands her life purpose: "as a Christian person, I try to think about the people that are suffering. I don't know how to teach anybody how to deal with pain. I just go to pain. I just go to people that are suffering, and if I can't do anything physically, I can write about it or donate something to the cause or whatever, but I don't

ignore it. I can't just turn my back on life and suffering and people. I try to do the best I can in all the ways that I can... it's my job, but it's kind of like my ministry too."

And she concludes with this: "I think love is the answer to all of it. God is love."

I am not impressed by wealth or celebrity, but I **AM** impressed by people who use their position of privilege to make a positive difference in the world. There is perhaps no better example in our country than the work done by the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation.

Bill Gates is the second richest person in the world, behind the man we're all making richer every day - Jeff Bezos of Amazon. The Gates Foundation gives away billions a year - they target the projects they think will make the most lasting difference in lifting people from poverty, like ending child mortality, distributing vaccines and improving access to education. What is it that motivates them?

"We both come from families that believed in leaving the world better than you found it," says Melinda Gates. "My parents made sure my siblings and I took the social justice teachings of the Catholic Church to heart. Bill's mom was known, and his dad still is known, for showing up to advocate for a dizzying number of important causes and support more local organizations than you can count. Our goal is to do what our parents taught us and do our part to make the world better." They are motivated, in other words, by love.

The gospel of John does not give us a birth story; there are no swaddling clothes, no shepherds or stars or angels or magi. Instead there are these images and metaphors. "In the beginning was the Word. In the Word was life, and that life was

light - a light that shines in the darkness, a Light that the darkness has never overtaken. And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

Dolly Parton is a light that shines in the darkness. The Gates Foundation lights up places where life has felt bleak and hopeless.

I’m sure that there are philanthropic people in the world who are not motivated by faith, but I also don’t think it’s any coincidence that these people have been. When the church is at its best, it is helping to teach about a God who loves us unconditionally, a God who accepts us at our core as people made in God’s very image. When the church is at its best, we not only teach about that unconditional love, but we try to model it, embody it. We tell our Sunday school teachers and youth group advisors and confirmation mentors, “You don’t have to have all of the right answers, you don’t have to know everything about the Bible or church history. What we want you to do, most of all, is to help our children and youth know that they are valued, that this is a place where they can be themselves.”

The story of Christmas is a story of that same God who created us, that same God who loves us, choosing to enter the world to become one of us. Jesus walked on this earth to show us how to love one another.

That love is the light of the world. The call to love is a call to all of us. Answering the call doesn’t require that we be wealthy or famous. God makes that pretty clear when he chooses Mary and Joseph from the town no one had ever heard of.

The call to love requires that each of us do what we can, with what we have, where we are. Answering the call will look different for each of us, and it will change

throughout our lifetimes. It starts with the deep awareness that we are loved, and from that deep well of acceptance bubbles up a desire to share that love with others.

One writer puts it this way: “The way of love will show us the right thing to do every single time. It’s how we stay decent in indecent times. Loving is not always easy, but like with muscles, we get stronger both with repetition and as the burden gets heavier, and it works.”

Love has been challenging work this year. I have heard from many people that their relationships with relatives and friends have been strained by both politics and by the way different people are responding to the pandemic. How do you feel if you are a front-line medical professional and your own family members are not being as careful as you think they should be? How do you not take that personally?

When you care passionately about social justice, and you think that one of your friends believes something that is moving the needle in the opposite direction, how do you react?

How do we learn to speak the truth in love? Paul tells us that love is patient. Can we learn to be patient with one another, even while we are impatient for the world to change for the better? Love calls us to listen to one another instead of jumping to conclusions. Love calls us to sit down with people with whom we disagree, listen to their life stories, understand why they think the way they do, and search for that common ground from which love emerges. Love reminds us that most people don’t feel that they are loved unconditionally, certainly not all the time. Most people carry around scars and wounds, and most people are doing the best they can.

This time last week, one of our church members - a woman in her early 40's - was in the hospital. She'd been diagnosed with COVID several days earlier and was at home when she began exhibiting stroke-like symptoms. She was extremely confused and had difficulty finding words. Her doctor was concerned and had her admitted for tests and observation. Last Saturday she received a notification on her phone that her lab results were in. She was trying to understand what they meant when her night nurse came into the room, and she asked the nurse to help her.

She told me later: "My nurse was very rushed, distracted and borderline annoyed with my question and told me I should just Google it because she didn't know how to describe it to me. She never came in to my room again for her entire 12-hour shift. The majority of the nurses on the COVID unit were incredible. You could tell that they were trying to smile behind their masks, but you could also tell how tired they all are. On Sunday morning I watched our church service on my phone. And during the silent prayer, I prayed for my night nurse because she was clearly burnt out and struggling. My heart goes out to all of them."

That is love. When we put ourselves in someone else's shoes, set aside judgment and pray for one another, that is love.

It is what lights the world, and nothing will ever be more powerful than the light of love. Thanks be to God.