

RECONNECT WITH GOD

I John 4: 7-21

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It's an old expression - if the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

In other words, most of us look at the world one way, with one analysis, one solution.

Even though the problems of our world today are complicated, many of us have one "go-to" explanation. To some people, the answer is always their political party. If only more people voted the way I do, the world's problems would be better.

Here are some of the explanations I've heard recently:

"The **problem** is entitlements. People are too lazy; no one wants to work."

"The **problem** is greed, too big a gap between the haves and the have-nots."

"The **answer** to our problems is that more people should drive hybrid or electric cars."

"The **answer** to our problems is that people should be more patriotic."

We all see the world through a certain lens, based on the way we were raised, the people who influenced us, the kinds of challenges and opportunities we've had along the way.

This is nothing new. In Wednesday morning Bible Study, we're just beginning to read through the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived near Jerusalem at a time when his small country was being attacked by superpowers coming from all directions. Everyone was afraid, the economy was tanking, and the nation's leadership was weak. Jeremiah

spoke out, and he said, “The answer is simple and clear. We have forgotten to live the way God asked us to. We’ve forgotten the commandments. We aren’t taking care of each other. We aren’t putting God first.”

People looked at Jeremiah and thought, “That doesn’t even make sense. What does our relationship with God have to do with anything? This is a political and military crisis.” But Jeremiah saw everything through that lens. “Our job is to return to God. Live the way God has asked to live. The rest of life will fall into place.” He had one way to look at the world, and we continue to read his words today.

Centuries later, St. Augustine summed up the laws and commandments this way: “Love God, and then do as you please.”

Both Jeremiah and Augustine meant the same thing. If we are able to embrace the fact that God loves us, if we are able to draw near to the heart of God, and see that God’s love is universal, then we don’t need to worry so much about memorizing all of the rules and laws. Love is at the essence of all of them. “Am I doing the loving thing?” becomes the question at the heart of all ethical matters. “Is this decision contributing to the well-being of humanity and the planet itself?” (Or is there a better decision I could be making?). If we keep God’s priorities and values in mind, we’ll select better leaders. The world will be a more just and compassionate place.

Here’s the lens through which I’ve been seeing the world lately. Bad religion is doing so much harm, and we have barely tapped the possibility of what good religion can do. I define bad religion as religion based on fear and punishment, religion that tells an individual, “You’re not okay, you’re not good enough, there’s something wrong with you.” If we grow up with that kind of message, we will live as if we always have to

prove something to the world. We're combatting the world. If I don't feel loved at my core, then I'll be looking for opportunities to knock someone else down a peg every chance I get, because seeing someone else humiliated makes me feel like I'm on top - at least for a moment. If we live in fear of God, then we stay far away from God. If we always think we'll be punished, we tend to not do anything. We lay low, hoping God doesn't even notice us. It's a terrible way to live.

I define good religion by these core scripture passages. Good religion starts with the creation story - with God saying to everyone and everything God creates, "You are good; there is a part of me inside of you." It continues with the story of the baptism of Jesus, in which God speaks from the heavens, saying, "You are my beloved child, in you I am well-pleased." We see good religion in the laws of the Jewish religion, found in our Old Testament - nothing is more important than caring for the needs of the most vulnerable, the widows and orphans. We see good religion in the story of the Prodigal Son - the story of a God who forgives us even before we ask and always welcomes us home. We see good religion in the story of the lost sheep - the story of a God who will leave 99 sheep behind to search for the one who is lost - that is how precious each of us is and how personal God's love is. We see good religion in the story of the Good Samaritan - the example of neighborly love that shatters all expectations and prejudices.

What difference would it make in our personal lives if we were able to draw close to the universal, accepting love of God?

Think about how you feel on your best days. When you are at your best, you are fully present with the people around you. You express concern for others, but you also take care of yourself - you get enough rest, you attend to your health.

On our worst days, we complain more than we thank. We're distracted and irritable.

Now we're always going to have good days and bad days, but finding ways to feel closer to God can tip the scales and actually change our behavior and our outlook. I know it's true in my own life.

When I'm feeling irritable, it's almost always a sign that I have neglected my spiritual practice. For me, that means starting the day with prayer, silence, and journaling. Finding time for solitude. Spending time in nature. Those practices, among others, keep me in tune with God. They remind me that I'm okay, that I am the recipient of God's unconditional love, that I don't have to prove myself.

I have learned this lesson over and over again. I feel more like the person God created me to be when I nurture my spiritual life.

I have more time for spiritual practice now than I once did. I am fully empathetic with those who are working full-time and raising children - I did that for many years. I understand that some people are caregivers, some are working more than one job, some are single parents, some are coping with health challenges of their own. But I encourage everyone to find even a few minutes a day for quiet, for listening to God, to read a passage of scripture, listen to a favorite piece of meditative music, whatever works for you and however you can work it into your life. I'd be happy to talk with you about how to start.

How many of our daily annoyances would be reduced if more people had a spiritual practice? Friday afternoon, I was driving to a wedding rehearsal - it was a venue I'd never visited before, so I was driving a bit slowly, probably just at the speed limit. The driver behind me was right on my tail, and when I pulled into the parking lot, she honked several times at me, loudly. Had she started her day with a reminder that God loves her unconditionally? Somehow I doubt it.

How much of the vitriol on social media would be reduced if more people had a spiritual practice? How much less violent might our world be?

We spend so much energy trying to feel like winners, but what if we remember that we've already won in every way that counts?

We spend so much money trying to fill up the emptiness we feel, trying to cover up the despair, but what if we were to remember that the hole in our hearts is God-shaped, and only God can fill it?

Now you may be thinking that I'm awfully naive to propose that the world's problems could be solved if everyone embraced God's universal love. That may sound too simplistic. But I know this for sure - sending more unconditional love into the world can't possibly hurt. No one ever complains that they wasted time by praying. No one ever feels worse after their spiritual practice. We've tried the military options, the political solutions, the fiscal policies...what if we tried praying fervently for the world, and opening ourselves up to ways God can use us for good?

We have been spending a lot of time and energy here these past several months preparing for our film series which begins this week. The issues facing our adolescents are very much on my mind, so I'm paying close attention to related news stories. Here's

one that hit my news feed just last week: the results of a study conducted on a group of 13-25 year olds, asking about their mental health and their religious practices. This demographic group is called Gen-Z. The study began with the understanding that there is a crisis. The introduction to the study stated this premise: “Born into a tech-saturated world shaken by domestic terrorism, ecological devastation and economic instability, Gen-Zers are more likely to report mental health concerns like anxiety and depression than older generations. In many ways, the pandemic has forced mental health discourse into the limelight, prompting the U.S. surgeon general to issue an advisory last December on COVID-19’s ‘devastating’ impact on youth mental health.”

But this survey wanted to know if religious practice could make a difference, and its results say, “Yes and no.” These results are fascinating, especially right now for our congregation.

First, the good news. Young people who pray are more likely to say that they are flourishing. 74% of those who pray describe their lives as whole and healthy, compared to 57% of those who don’t. The stats are similar for those who are connected to a spiritual community.

But here’s the rub. Not all religious communities are helpful. Young people who have experienced feelings of **exclusion** say that religion has done more harm than good. “I don’t want to be in a place that tells me I’m not good enough,” one student said. “My church taught me that the expectations are so high I’ll never achieve them.” He went on to say, “I need help with my daily life; that’s challenging enough.”

The editor of the report concluded with this: “Young people need to be reminded that they are loved unconditionally. They need to know that they are welcome as they

are - with all of their doubts and questions. They want to be in a place that acknowledges mystery and uncertainty.”

Our passage for today tells us that God is love. When we love one another, we draw near to the heart of God. There is no fear in love, no punishment; perfect love casts out all fear. Loving God, loving ourselves, loving one another; it is all the same - strands of the same cord that cannot be separated. Hear these words, let them soak into your mind, your heart, your soul: “My beloved friends, let us love one another because love is of God. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God in them. We love because God first loved us.” Who do you know who needs to hear these words? What difference might it make if we unleashed them into the world?