

Power and Love

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a five-part series

May 19, 2019

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Jeremiah 32:17 (CEB)

¹⁷ LORD God, you created heaven and earth by your great power and outstretched arm; nothing is too hard for you!

Psalms 147:4–5 (CEB)

⁴ God counts the stars by number,
giving each one a name.

⁵ Our Lord is great and so strong!
God's knowledge can't be grasped!

Proverbs 16:33 (CEB)

³³ The dice are cast into the lap;
all decisions are from the LORD.

Lamentations 3:37 (CEB)

³⁷ Who ever spoke and it happened if my
Lord hadn't commanded the same?

1 John 4:7–10 (CEB)

⁷ Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. ⁸ The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.

Power and Love. Where do we begin if we are truly to know God?

"God is in control." "It is God's will." . . . I hear statements like that all the time from fellow Christians. Some are said in response to small events, sometimes to world-shaking events. It is important for us to stop and consider what we really mean. Is God really and truly in control of all that happens in this world? Is every event and action part of God's pre-ordained plan? Many Christians think so. But many do not.

John Calvin believed that the place to begin to know God is God's sovereignty, exercised in his utter and complete control of all that happens in this world. For example, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* we find statements such as "No wind ever arises or increases except by God's express command" and ". . . I have his providence the determinative principle for all human plans and works." Simply put, everything that happens does so because God wills it. This goes beyond simply knowing, it is to claim that God exercises his sovereign power over every action and event, no matter how small and insignificant. Further, if you wonder where this leaves notions of free will, you are right. For Calvin, in the beginning God decided who would be saved and who would not. And, still further, if you think this means that Auschwitz was part of God's master plan, you are right; it does.

In contrast, following the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius and others, John Wesley believed that the place to begin to know God is not God's power and sovereignty, but God's love. That we have to understand God's sovereignty and power in light of God's love. And we Wesleyans do so because of Jesus.

In the light of Jesus

Suppose someone came up to you and asked you to tell them about God, to describe God to them. Where would you begin? With an adjective? A story perhaps? What

words would sum up the essential characteristics of God? What would you most want them to know?

Pause before you answer, for you'll find yourself on one path or another. For example, you might begin with the simple and very true statement, "God is great." You would probably soon find yourself talking about God's creation of the cosmos and his control of it. Or you might begin with "God is good" and launch into a discussion of good and evil, morality and ethics.

But if Jesus is the *full* revelation of God (and you are answering these God-questions as a Christian), then how does Jesus' incarnation reveal to us God's greatness or even his goodness? You probably don't need the baby Jesus to know that God is great or to know that God is good, for there is ample evidence in the Hebrew Scriptures to show both of those statements are true. Further, God's greatness and goodness are themes shared by all the monotheistic religions.

What is it that we Christians have to say about God that is unique and gets to the very essence of God? To put a finer point on it, *what is it that we know about God that we would not know without Jesus?*

The apostle John takes us right to the heart of the matter with the simple statement, "God is love" (see the above passage from 1 John, v. 8). Note that he doesn't say, "God loves." A true statement but not unique to Christianity. John writes that God *IS* love. That in God's very being, God *is* love, God is inherently relational – three persons who love and are loved in a way and to a depth you and I cannot even imagine. This is no mere sentiment, like you might find on a blog or a bumper sticker – this is who God really is, revealed to us in the truth of Jesus.

Jesus, fully human and fully divine, reveals to us that God is inherently relational, one God existing as three persons, each of whom is fully and completely God though none are all of God. The three -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- are not simply three parts of a whole. Each *is* the whole though not all of it. God is Triune.

The Living God – personal and triune and love

When Jesus was a young boy, he would have been taught to recite the Shema, a Jewish prayer built on a verse from Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord alone."¹ As a devout Jew, Jesus would have recited this prayer morning and evening. The Shema was akin to a battle cry of oppressed Israel, who had endured centuries of foreign domination. Despite this domination, the Jews of Jesus' day remained fiercely monotheistic, making them unique in the ancient world.

Despite the pantheons of gods offered up by competing religions, the Jews insisted that there was one, and only one, God – YHWH -- who had created all that there is and had chosen Israel to be the means of creation's renewal. For a decade after Jesus, all the believers in Jesus were Jews, just as Jesus was a Jew. As such, these early Christians remained fervent monotheists. But this soon posed a significant problem for them. Jesus said and did things that only God could say and do. Who was this Jesus? Could he possibly be God himself? But how could this be if there is only one God?

In the writings of the New Testament, we can see the first Christians coming to understand that God had revealed, through Jesus, his deeper nature. Namely, that while there is unity in God (yes, there is one God!) there is also community, fellowship, and love in God's very being. In many ways, John's gospel is written to convince readers that Jesus is fully God. From this beginning, Christians came to believe and proclaim that God is triune – one God, three persons.

¹ This verse from Deuteronomy (the fifth book of the Old Testament) can be translated as "the Lord is one" or "the Lord alone." We probably shouldn't take it to be an ancient Jewish statement about God's "inner being." Rather, it is a cry that there is only one God and that God is YHWH, the God of Israel.

Without question, for many Christians the whole notion of the Trinity is one of the most perplexing and seemingly irrelevant doctrines of the faith. Though we might affirm a statement something like this, “We believe in one God, who has always known himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,”² it can be pretty hard for us to see how this makes much sense or how it matters to our lives as Christians. Yet, our belief in a personal, triune God is foundational to all that makes Christianity unique among the world’s major religions.

God is love

We proclaim that there is one God consisting of three persons who have always been, are now, and always shall be a loving community of three, the Trinity. This truth about God makes John’s statement, “God is love,” not mere sentiment, but a concrete statement of God’s being. After all, did John mean that God loves more than anyone? Or that God loves without ceasing? Or perhaps that God loves truly? All this is accurate, but it isn’t the same thing as saying that God is love. The simple statement “God is love,” seems almost nonsensical. Love must have an object. We love something or we love someone. How could any single person, in isolation, be love?

However, when we proclaim that God is unity in three persons, then the statement that God is love makes perfect sense. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always been, are now, and always will be in loving relationship with one another. God is love because God is inherently relational. The loving relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit form the basis of God’s very essence. The three persons of the Godhead³ live in eternal community, in a loving community of three persons. Indeed, it is from God’s love that we learn the true meaning of love. As John writes: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16). The triune God is both lover and beloved in one God.

This is where John Wesley’s personal theology and, hence, United Methodist beliefs begin: “God is love.” In the lyrics of Charles Wesley, John’s brother: “Love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down.”

The Wesley brothers understood that it is love and grace that define God. Grace is simply love in action. The cross, the sacrifice and faithfulness it embodied, takes us to the heart, the essence, of God. As Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians: “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” (from 2:4-8).

And so we understand God’s power and sovereignty in the light of his love. Was Auschwitz part of God’s plans and purposes? Of course not, for if it were, God would be a monster. No . . . most of the wrongs in this world are committed by humans exercising their God-given freedom for evil rather than good. Why would God give us such freedom? Because for love to be love, it must be freely given from a free and willing heart. Even God can’t change that. I really don’t think it is much more complicated than that.

² In the UMC, we say this much more formally: “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in the unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” This is from our Articles of Religion in the UMC Book of Discipline.

³ Yet another way to express God’s unity-in-threeness. You’ll find that people use many words and images in the effort to express the unity and relationality of God. Most of these efforts are helpful, but none are complete or wholly sufficient.

We too are relational . . . created for community

There is a fundamental truth about humankind here . . . we are created for community. The opening chapters of Genesis tell us that humans are made in God's image. We too are inherently relational; we are made to live in loving relationship with God and one another. It should surprise no one that Jesus reminded the scribe that loving God and neighbor are the two great commandments. We are created to love.

Frankly, it is a mistake to believe that the sole focus of our Christian life is to be our personal relationship with Jesus. Rather, our relationship with Jesus Christ is to be lived out in relationship with others. We are called not to isolation, but to fellowship and communion. We baptize our children into this community of God's people and we are responsible for doing all we can to build it up. Thus, a key test for any congregation, not just St. Andrew, is whether others see community in us. Are we inviting? Are we welcoming? Are we involved in the life of St. Andrew or do we just show up for church an hour each week (or every other week!)? This gets to the very heart of the Gospel and is why our joyful proclamation of a triune, relational God is such Good News to those who feel isolated and alone. Good News, indeed.

Daily Bible Readings

More on power and love

Monday, Psalm 47 "God reigns over the nations . . ."

Tuesday, Daniel 34-36 "God does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth."

Wednesday, Nehemiah 9:32 The great and mighty God's covenant of love.

Thursday, John 1:1-5 "Was with God and was God"

Friday, 1 John 4:13-21 Again . . . "God is love" (v. 16)

Saturday, Galatians 5:13-15 Called to a community of love.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It is a great time to join us!

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2).

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *The Apostles' Creed: what we believe and why it matters*

Video of each week's class is posted here: vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy