

First Presbyterian Church
John 15:9-17, Luke 22:17-20, “Christ the Lord: Abounding in Loyal Love”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 2/4/2024

The great hymn “Immortal, invisible, God only Wise,”
Walter Chalmers Smith begins with these words:
Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great Name we praise.

It’s a hymn that, like many others, emphasizes the omni-attributes of God.
Omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent.
All knowing, all powerful, ever present.

These are *good and important* attributes that are important in a God
who created all things and holds all things together.

But it is difficult to imagine how a God who is so massive and powerful
could also draw near to listen to the mumbled whispers
of our private hopes and fears.

We’re in the third week of a four-part series exploring
how Jesus helps us connect the dots between the ways God
is portrayed in seemingly different ways throughout the Bible.
Our foundation is the characteristics of Yahweh found in Exodus 34:6,
**“Yahweh, Yahweh, compassionate, gracious, slow to anger,
abounding in loyal love and faithfulness.”**

The first week we looked at the compassion of Yahweh
toward the Hebrew slaves in Egypt
and the compassion of Jesus for two blind friends who greeted him
as the Messiah along the road to Jerusalem.

This same compassion is on display in our own lives and world today.

Last week we saw how Christ is the manifestation of God's grace
and how incredibly slow to anger God is both in the Old Testament
and the New Testament.

I also noted that cultural changes and linguistic limitations explain some of why
we might sense a difference in how God is portrayed
in one part of the Bible than another.

Today we sit with the idea of Christ the Lord: Abounding in Loyal Love.

Loyal love is Tim Mackie's translation of the Hebrew word *hesed*,
which appears more than 250 times in the Old Testament.

It is also translated as steadfast love, lovingkindness,
mercy, and goodness.

Iain Duguid explains

"Normally, *hesed* describes something that happens within an existing
relationship, whether between two human beings or between God and an
individual. In human relationships, *hesed* implies loving our neighbor, not
merely in terms of warm emotional feelings but in acts of love and service
that we owe to the other person simply because [they are] part of the
covenant community."

And so as we read in Micah 6:8, God's people are to do justly,
to love *hesed* [there translated "mercy"],
and to walk humbly with their God."

How do we encounter this *hesed* love in our own lives?

I remember back to when the pandemic first hit in the spring of 2020.

We were all shocked and scared, nobody knew what to do...
so we bought toilet paper.

But when I spoke with the church's leadership, the elders and deacons,
it was clear that they felt a commitment and a duty
to remain in contact with the congregation.

So the deacons assembled a plan to contact everyone in the church
and to periodically bring little gift bags with encouraging items
and communion elements in them.

The bags themselves weren't that important.

Most people have bread and juice or wine at home
(and during the height of the pandemic,
some of us had a lot more wine at home than usual)—

But these bags the home visits represented
something deeper than providing supplies.

They showed a commitment to offering support, care, and connection
through a global crisis that put a tremendous strain on everyone.

That is loyal love – not just feeling loving feelings,
but acting in loving ways because of a committed relationship
in our community.

Jesus is speaking of this loyal love in John 15.

In verse 9 Jesus says to his disciples,

**“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.
Now remain in my love.”**

In v. 4 of this same passage Jesus said, **“Remain in me.”**

Now in v. 9 he says, **“Remain in my love.”**

This is not love that comes and goes, this is not purely love as a feeling or emotion.
This is loyal love. This is covenant love.

This is love that abides.

Build a house with my love, stay connected with my love.

This is the same love that God the Father has for Jesus.

This is the same love that God promised in covenant
relationship with Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants.

We are invited here to share in the divine love
between God the Father and God the Son.

How does that happen? Surprisingly,

Jesus says remaining in his love means...obeying his commands.

“Oh, I knew it! There had to be some kind of a catch to this!”

But wait – look at what the command of Jesus is in v. 12:

“My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.”

Jesus loves us *first* and then we love one another

with the love that Jesus has already loved us with.

So if we are people in genuine relationship with Jesus

who receive the hesed love of God through him

and share that love with others, we're connected.

We abide. We remain.

We live in a house of loyal love,

a house of hesed built by Jesus.

While it is used in many different ways, the loyal-love of God

found in the Old Testament is often connected to the idea of *covenant*.

The covenant that God makes with Abraham and his descendants in Gen 15-17

is rooted in steadfast loyal-love that endures through generations.

This covenant offers them a means of relationship with God,

and it in turn lays the foundation

for right relationship with each other.

The covenant establishes a lasting relationship that is much more than a contract.

It's not a fee-for-service transactional relationship.

It is like a marriage, a promise to remain

in a lasting way of relationship and love with one another.

If there's anything that defines God in the Old Testament,

it is the continual offering of an enduring and faithful love

through the covenant promises which God made

to Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants:

Promises of people, land, becoming a great nation,

and blessing all families on earth.

Jesus shares this characteristic of enduring and faithful love with Yahweh.

In fact, just as Yahweh established
the original covenant relationship with Abraham and Sarah,
Jesus established a new covenant
which begins with God's chosen people
and extends to all peoples on earth.

In Luke 22, Jesus is in the upper room with the 12 disciples.

It was the night when the Jews remembered Passover.
Passover, when God delivered Israel from Egypt
through a dreadful plague
on the first born of every family.

On Passover, those who sacrificed a spotless lamb
and put its blood over their doorways
demonstrated faith that they were part of God's covenant
with Abraham and that God's loyal-love
would abide with them.

At the Last Supper, Jesus initiates a *new covenant* not founded
in the body and blood of an animal,
but in Jesus own body and blood.

Jesus uses the Passover symbolism to identify a permanent and lasting
salvation that is for all people. This is loyal love.

This is the character of Yahweh
perfectly expressed in the person of Jesus.

Jesus anticipated this being his last Passover meal until after he had suffered
and the reign of God on earth was established
when he returned again.

And so he instituted a new kind of Passover meal with bread and wine
symbolizing his body and his blood that the disciples were to
partake in while they awaited his return.

Of course in this moment depicted in Luke 22
none of them could understand that—Jesus has not even been arrested
let alone crucified or resurrected from the dead.

But soon they would understand it.

In Luke followed his gospel with an account of the early church,
the book of Acts. In Acts 2:42 we read a description
of the first Christians gathered in Jerusalem:

**“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship,
to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”**

The breaking of bread is the first description of communion.

This is the central practice that all Christian worship is oriented around.

Our lives are filled with many voices telling us to be afraid.

There are wars and rumors of wars. There are diseases and health crises.

We make terrible mistakes and hurt each other so deeply
that we don’t know if our relationships can ever be fixed.

We all need an enduring love that will last no matter what.

That no nation can destroy, that no disease can infect,
that no financial crisis can touch, that not even death can threaten.

So when we come to this table we are experiencing the loyal-love of Yahweh,
expressed by Jesus Christ our Lord, and made alive in the present-day
by the Holy Spirit.

This is the covenant-love of the Living God for all who believe.

This is our contact point with the God we read about in the Old Testament
who called Abraham and Sarah,
with Jesus who met with his disciples in the upper room,
and with the Holy Spirit poured out on the church
who makes us alive with Christ.

Let us worship Christ the Lord: compassionate, gracious, slow to anger,
and abounding in loyal love.