**October 31, 2021**  “God Alone”

Deuteronomy 6: 1-9, Psalm 146, Hebrews 9: 11-14, Mark 12: 28-34

On this eve of All Saints Day, I would like to do something a little bit different, and begin by telling you about a particular Saint who has made a big difference in my life and faith.

Seven years ago, when I was studying at Vancouver School of Theology, doing my field work as a student minister at Central Presbyterian Church in Vancouver, I made a wonderful friend in a member of the congregation. His name was Gregory Balderstone.

Even in a very casual congregation like Central, Gregory stood out.

Whereas *nobody* wore three-piece suits or flowered hats to church at Central, he was even more dressed down, always wearing the same beat-up New York Yankees cap and equally-well-loved brown leather jacket every Sunday. He sort of looked like an older, more casual Stephen Spielberg. And his wild hair and beard added to the effect.

Gregory was casual and calm, not just in his appearance but in his manner, he was honest, direct, curious, and eager to share about his life. He was originally from New York (where he got both his directness and his fantastic Brooklin accent), but he had spent the 60s-onward on the West Coast, mostly in San Francisco where he became a very successful photographer for magazines.

I liked all of these things about Gregory (his casual look, his directness, his interesting life), but I think the real reason that we became fast friends is because of his openness to talking about God. Gregory had been born Jewish, before moving into 60s hippie spirituality, and he eventually ended up a Christ follower.

As a Christian though, he brought a fantastic sense of humour and casualness to his faith.

He would often ask things like: “Why are you Christians always so serious?” (still “*you* Christians”)

 “Why do you worry so much about sin?”

“Don’t you know God wants you to be happy as well as holy?”

He told me that as a Jew, he had taken it for granted that he had direct access to God. He was one of God’s people (we all were in his view), and he didn’t see the need to worry so much. If God had sent His Son Jesus to show us love and the way to God, why should we worry, why should we be afraid, least of all afraid of Him?

Whenever I think of Gregory, in-fact, this is always the memory my mind and my heart come back to:

One October day after church, after I had read and preached on the same texts we have heard this morning, Gregory asked me point-blank: “You talked today about ‘fearing God,’ I don’t fear God. I love God. So why should I fear Him?”

For several minutes, I stood in the doorway with Gregory, stumbling through an answer:

“Well, it’s fear as in reverence, it’s fear as in obedience, not so much terror...”

“Well, you see, what I think Jesus meant when he said that is…”

“Ok, well if we go back to the original Hebrew the word itself means something a bit different…”

And as I fumbled through each explanation, as I myself became less convinced, and as I felt smaller and smaller in my stature as an about-to-be minister of the church, Gregory just stood there and gave me the same curious and loving look he always gave me. The same one I had sat beside at church and across from at coffee shops for the years of our friendship. After I finally gave up, Gregory hugged me, as he always did on Sunday mornings, and he said in his plain New York style: “God wants *you* to be happy.”

A few months later, in February, Gregory suddenly died.

It turns out that for the two-plus-years I had known him, he had slowly been dying of cancer.

It broke my heart, that given all he could have been doing with that time, all the precious hours he could have been spending with his wife, or visiting his children and grandchildren, he had chosen to spend so many Sunday afternoons in coffee shops with me, talking about life and God.

As you may have noticed, in my time here at St. Andrew’s, I am not an overtly emotional person. Aside from the occasional fieriness I bring to preaching about justice, I don’t believe I’ve ever cried while on duty at St. Andrew’s.

But the day Gregory died started for me a period of several months where I cried every single day, especially at church.

It got to the point that my classmates and professors at VST knew it would come each Tuesday and Thursday chapel service, and they knew not to worry too much.

When chapel ended, I would stay seated when everyone else had gone to coffee hour and just weep over my friend, and my other recent losses, and the beautiful love of God that was mixed up in all of it.

The following September, after I had gotten all of my tears out, after my heart had healed and changed from the experiences of that awfully difficult year, I was back in Thursday chapel at VST and I noticed someone, a new student, at the back of the chapel, crying during the service.

As recently as a year before, such tears, such raw emotion would have made me uncomfortable. I would have simply turned away and ignored it, unable to sympathize with such obvious emotionality. But Gregory and God had changed me.

Getting up from my seat and heading to the back of the chapel, I stood by this new student (now a good friend and colleague in Ministry in Saskatoon) and I leaned over to tell her something:

“If you are going to try to beat my record for crying in chapel, you had better step your game up.”

By the time her crying turned to laughter, and then tears again, and back to laughter, the two of us had become fast friends, just like Gregory and I had years earlier. And she and I have enjoyed many similar conversations about life and the love of God.

In the texts that we have read this morning, there is a thread.

A thread of knowledge, a thread of wisdom, a thread of God’s love that I was not able to see when I first met the man who would help me finally to understand it.

In Deuteronomy, the Law Giver tells the people Israel (just as they are about to inherit the land promised them by God) that they must ‘fear the Lord God all the days of their life.”

The Law Giver goes on to tell them that by doing so, by remembering God and fearing Him; by reciting His words, and fixing them as a sign on their hands and on their doorposts, they will observe His commandments and maintain their righteousness before Him.

Thousands of years later, after Christ had come and died for the sins of not only Israel but the whole world, the author of the letter to the Hebrews made the case plainly:

‘If the blood of goats and bulls (that is, the blood of the traditional Israelite offerings for purification) sanctified those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified; How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!”

So that we begin to see the thread:

We start with fear.

Fear of God.

Fear to do what is right and holy and righteous so that we may be saved by the Law of God.

Or, in our world where so many people do not know God, we begin with fear of the world; fear of our enemies, fear of ourselves.

But then a new thing happens, Christ (God in human flesh) comes as a voluntary sacrifice for *our sins,* *for our unrighteousness, for our trespasses, for our human condition of sin,* for our own inability to keep God’s Law or maintain the holiness He asks of us.

So, indeed, we may start with fear. We may start with fear of God, as all in Israel did in the days of Deuteronomy, but we end up with the love of Christ.

The sacrifice He has volunteered to make on our behalf, that no person can ever earn or even fully comprehend.

But here’s the most important part: who *makes* that change?

Who makes that change from fear to love?

If we start in fear and end up in God, it is not our fear that has done it, rather it is Christ alone who has saved us. Who has redeemed us from sin and is in the *process* of making us a new creation.

Christ revealed on the cross, Christ revealed in the Scriptures, Christ revealed in all the Saints of our faith.

Friends, what this means, is that when it comes to the love of Christ, when it comes to the love of Christ witnessed to in the Gospels, and made known in the work of the Holy Spirit, and revealed in the life of all of the saints, we cannot achieve this love out of fear, but only out of loving relationship.

Loving relationship with Christ and one another, who more-and-more reveal the sides of Christ we cannot see for ourselves.

Friends, each of us has saints in our own lives, each of us has Gregorys, each of us has been a Gregory to someone else (whether we realize it or not): helping us, wherever we begin in faith, to let go of fear and embrace love, especially when we struggle to accept that love for ourselves.

This is not done out of fear, out of fear of or for our God or our neighbour but out of love!

When Jesus Christ our Lord, in the Gospel of Mark this morning, was challenged by a scribe, He was asked: “Which commandment is the first of all?”

Jesus answered:

 “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ 31The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Even the scribes who challenged Him, even those who sought His blood before all other things had to admit that he was correct.

“You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; 33and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’

And they even volunteered to add one other thing:

“—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

To Jesus’ enemies.

To those who were at that very moment attempting to spring a trap that would bind Him in His own words and reveal the guilt they were sure of, Jesus responded with Love.

34When Jesus saw that [the scribe] answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Jesus, the one whom they were persecuting, the who—in the name of the righteous fear of God—they were attempting to trap and to kill, this Jesus blessed them, saying “you are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Friends, this is what love of neighbour means.

This is what it means to love others in the love of Christ that we have been shown.

That even if we one day find ourselves persecuted, even if we one day find ourselves being sought by our neighbours even to take our lives from us, Jesus teaches us that we must answer in love.

Simply put, friends, there is no end to the power of this love.

Whether it is revealed in new relationships, in existing ones, or in those that exist between the veil of life and death (those relationships with the saints who have passed before us), we are encouraged and instructed to continue in the love of Christ.

We do this not out of fear.

Not out of fear of God’s righteousness, nor fear of eternal punishment.

But we do this out of love itself.

A love that transcends understanding, a love that transcends time, a love that transcends even death.

So that as we live and move and have our being in this love;

As we practice this love with friend and enemy alike, we witness to the source of this love; that is, Christ crucified and resurrected for our sake.

The Christ who calls us to be not just holy, and not just happy, but above all things:

Loving.

Amen.