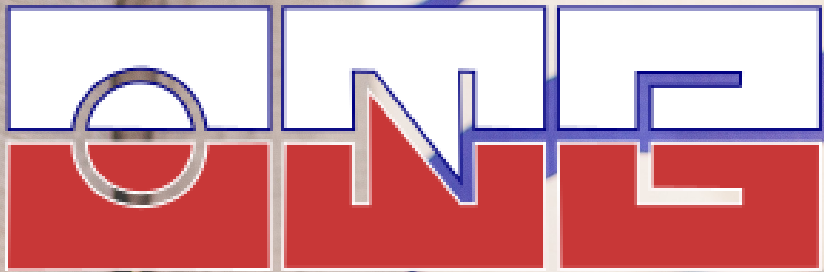


INSIDE:

+ **God's Unconditional Love**



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ONE is the official publication of the Ellis County Ministerial Alliance (ECMA) which guides its mission, content, and theme. The ECMA encourage submissions from ECMA congregations. Photographs, stories, testimonies, and other submissions should be directed toward your church leaders or sent via email to

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Editor's Note:

February is the month of Valentines, chocolates, and greeting cards, as we attempt to tell our loved ones how much we care. Our columnists offer their own perspectives on God's unconditional love for us and how that translates into our love for others.

St. Valentine Understood About the Sanctity of Love

Written by:

Cheryl Glassman

One of our Bible readings at church recently was from the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians: "Brothers and sisters: There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone." This verse, to a lot of folks, may lead them to think about service in the form of action--giving to the poor, helping one's neighbor. For some reason, this verse has always made me think of God's unconditional love, a very special gift.

This Christmas was a bit different for our family. Illness struck, and we were not able to exchange gifts as we had in year's past. Our gifts sat under

the tree, wrapped in colorful paper and bows, until the time we decided to take down the tree mid-January. The gifts were moved to a decorative bench until the time we could gather to open the packages.

Interesting--Christmas came and went, yet the gifts held their place, basically center stage, in our household. Every time I would be a position to ponder their presence, I would smile and think about what was inside the packages. It made me think of the person the package was going to, and how much I loved them. The packages sat, waiting for the recipients to receive them and, hopefully, enjoy or use the contents.

Isn't that kind of like God's unconditional love for us? He waits...his love like a beautiful gift, wrapped in the presence

of the Holy Spirit, and through Jesus and his ministry we come to see and know God's love in action. This allows us to open our hearts to God's special gift, renewing and embracing our faith, so we can share God's love with others.

God's love has been shared with others for a long time, hasn't it? Some ways we know of God's love were profound, and we hear about them through the lives of the saints. Some of the stories of the saints have taken a back seat to traditions --like St. Valentine. The Catholic Church tells of his life, a physician and priest who lived in Rome. The emperor at the time, Claudius II, was banning marriage. It seemed Claudius felt marriage distracted young soldiers from their duties. Valentine secretly married many individuals, but was eventually caught and sentenced to death for his love

St. Valentine Understood (Continued)

of God and his beliefs.

Valentine understood God's unconditional love and the importance of the sanctity of love. So then, St. Valentine saw the importance of looking past himself, and he gave others the opportunity to share their love in a special way with God's blessing. When we celebrate Valentine's Day in today's world and receive a "valentine," or a gift, it is because someone is celebrating a feeling of love

and/or affection for us. The person is taking time to see past himself or herself and offer us a moment to know that they love and appreciate us. I also think I need to be better at giving God this "moment." Reflecting on the words from the Letter to Titus Chapter 3:4-5 puts it in perspective: *"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He*

saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."

Maybe the best gift to give on Valentine's Day is a prayer of loving thanksgiving to the God who loves us unconditionally--no matter what we do.



Cheryl Glassman is the Minister of Music at St. Nicolas of Myra Catholic Church in Hays.

Loving When It's Easy, Hard, and In-Between

Written by:

Rev. Cana Moore

Love is a funny thing. It populates a lot of media spaces, like TV storylines about love, books on how to love or be loved, advice columns filled with suggestions for strengthening, offering, or getting love--even some old-school classifieds with people looking for love.

We have all kinds of love in the world, some of which get more attention than others, but each is valuable for a full life. Romantic love, platonic love, familial love--you either know it yourself or have seen it expressed. That doesn't even consider the

love between a person and their pet or the tender love you feel for a friend who has known you all your life. We can even think about love of self, which helps us offer love freely and receive it with openness, knowing that relationships are a beautiful two-way street.

Matthew 5 has a point about love that I often resist. This isn't because it is bad advice, but because this instruction and reminder by Jesus is difficult to follow. Matthew 5:44 reads, *"But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."*

I think loving my own family members is

complicated enough on a daily basis, let alone my enemies. In some ways, these two extremes are easier to grasp. I need to love both those who are closest to me and easiest to love and those who are farthest from me and hardest to love. We need to notice, however, an important element of this passage, found in verse 46 of the same chapter. *"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?"* Oof. What a reminder that love offered with the knowledge that love will be reciprocated isn't the extraordinary act we might think it is. This is a challenge for all of us who want to love well.

Loving When It's Easy, Hard, and In-Between (Continued)

Jesus tells us to love two ends of the spectrum--those close to us and those at odds with us, but the implication is that we need to love the in-between too. I want us to think about who Jesus is including here, not just the extremes of people we naturally love and people we want to hate, but also the people who annoy us, the people we tolerate, or the people we think are strange. I'm not saying we should put ourselves at risk by expressing our love to every stranger on the street. I am, however, saying that love, true love, means sacrificing in order to show compassion, care, and offering a welcoming hand.

Love means listening intentionally to your strange neighbor when she tells you the same story for the fifth time this week. Love means

choosing to keep an eye on the person at the party you know is likely to be left out, and stepping in to ask them about their week if they are looking lost. Love means saying yes to lunch with your co-worker who might be a bit more chatty than you like. And, most crucially, love means seeing each interaction as a whole human thing, approaching it not as a service project, but as a chosen desire to meet God in the shared space of love.

Valentine's Day often gets a bad reputation for being too commercialized, or created by the greeting card companies to sell more cards. Regardless of your opinion about the holiday itself, consider if this occasion is a good reminder about offering love to others--for those easy, difficult, and in-between loves. Consider in your own mind: Who is

complicated for me to offer love to, and how can I do so this month?

Maybe it is by giving time to someone I want to brush off, and instead listening with love to whatever they have to share. It could be taking the initiative to invite someone over for coffee or dinner who is usually the last to get an invite in my group. It might even be bringing flowers for the front desk worker at my office, or tipping extra for my barista. All love is of God, and everyone who loves is born of God, the scriptures say. May we choose to love, when it is easy, when it is hard, and when it is in-between.



The Rev. Cana Moore is the pastor of Hays Christian Church

The Key Is to Seeing God's Love in Every Day Life

Written by:
Brandon Nimz

While we can clearly see God's love through Jesus's life, ministry, and sacrifice to pay for our sins, I find that I tend to actively experience His love in many of the little blessings He provides each day.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks a bit about how we should love in the same way that God loves, which also shows us a bit of how God does love. Matthew 5:43-48 says, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those

who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what

The Key Is to Seeing God's Love in Every Day Life (Continued)

are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

This way of loving both good and evil people is indeed in God's nature, but I think that we often miss opportunities to actively receive God's love when we are busy focusing on the worries and cares of this world (instead of praying and turning those worries over to God. By surrendering to him, we can focus on the opportunities for true life, joy, hope, faith, and love right in front of us).

Some simple examples of this are things like the stars in the sky at night or a sunrise. Have you ever had one of those moments where you look into the sky at night and feel how magnificent and massive everything is and how tiny you are in comparison? I've had some nights where looking into the sky felt downright scary. The same can be said of some sunrises that I have experienced—a slow lightening into beauty and life.

These things happen every day and every night, but most of the time I don't notice them if they are occurring, nor do I view them as truly sacred events or as the signs of God's love that He has given all of us to enjoy if we are in the right mental and spiritual place to do so.

The same can be said of many other things like birth; animals are born every day, as are people. One statistic I read said that 250 babies are born each minute. However, if that baby is your own, it is an incredibly impactful moment—and in many ways a sacred moment. Each day of our life, sacred moments are occurring if we have the eyes to see and ears to hear, and these are all part of God's love for all of us. Though we may not choose to sit in nature and just listen and be, to get up and watch all the sunrises or to relax and watch all the sunsets, each day these myriad sacred blessings are actively and freely being given to all of us.

Not only are we receiving some of His love through

these universal blessings that He gives to everyone, but we are even blessed to be part of a cycle of loving others and bringing about a better world for everyone because Christ died to free us from our sins and because the Holy Spirit is now actively transforming us to be more and more like Christ. We don't have to be conformed to the pattern of this world---busily trying to survive the stress and "hell on earth" around us; we can instead let our perspectives be transformed by the Holy Spirit to see the opportunities for the Kingdom of Heaven to continue to forcefully advance and to even be a part of that advancement—living for hope instead of fear, faith instead of despair, and love instead of hate. Yes, even for our enemies, we get to love instead of hate, just like God does for us.



Brandon Nimz is the Director of Unite Ministry in Hays.



“GOD TEACHES US TO LOVE BY PUTTING SOME UNLOVELY PEOPLE AROUND US. IT TAKES NO CHARACTER TO LOVE PEOPLE WHO ARE LOVELY AND LOVING TO YOU.”

- RICK WARREN

'Option 3' Offers Us Jesus' Unconditional Love

Written by:

Rev. Jonathan E. McCottry Sr.

Our society today has become one of wanting to choose to do things the easy way rather than the hard way. Many today would select push-button gadgets and automatic appliances. For everything, and in every situation, there would be no struggle and no sweat and no toil. Every decision that we make would have the outcome of ease where there would be no obstacles.

While that may be the choice today in this society, God was faced with a serious challenge when sin was introduced into his universe. God had to make a choice as to how to remove the blight of sin from his perfect universe.

The choices before God were: Option #1 to change the law. The challenge with this is the fact that the God whom we serve says that he "changes not!" God is eternal and immutable. His directions do not have any variableness. This clearly means that Option #1 was not even a remote consideration.

With Option #2, God could

have immediately destroyed mankind. This outcome would have cleared the challenge, and for the rest of the ages throughout eternity anyone who serves God would realize that if you crossed him or if you did anything against his will, you would immediately be destroyed.

God desires not to have a universe of robots. He has given to us free moral agency called the power of choice. Because of that luxury of choice, God also eliminated Option #2.

Understanding the challenge at hand, we now see that the only way that human beings could be saved must be through the power of redemption. Redemption goes deeper than just to save men and women. Jesus revealed the option of replacing each person with himself through the unconditional love of his atoning grace. He who knows no sin became sin for us, so that we might receive the life that Jesus deserves while Jesus takes upon himself the death that we deserve.

Option #3 requires not the removal of sin, but the removal

of the penalty of sin. Human beings, who deserve the penalty of death and who, by their own actions, created a state of disrepair in the perfection of this universe, are only redeemed through the power of the blood of Jesus Christ. The Bible says: *"And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission,"* Hebrews 9:22 (KJV).

We only receive salvation through the sacrificial death of Christ. Every sinner has forfeited his or her life by his or her own transgressions, and the law of God requires our deaths. Jesus, through his death, becomes the replacement for his helpless creation, and he gives to us eternal life through his shed blood.

It is the unconditional love of Jesus that compelled him to choose this most difficult way of saving man, and this is the very reason why we accept his blood and walk in the light. *"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses*

'Option 3' Offers Us Jesus' Unconditional Love (Continued)

us from all sin," 1 John 1:7 (KJV).

Today in spite of the scriptures, some still suggest the easy way. *"Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law,"* Romans 3:31 (KJV).

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us," 1 John 1:8 (KJV).

Isn't it ironic that we try to adopt Option #1 and Option #2 in our theology by suggesting that there is no

such thing as the law, or that there is no such thing as sin? It is also interesting that human beings would suggest that God does away with the law when, conversely, it is the penalty of the law that was removed by the blood of Jesus.

The term "remission" means absolution, amnesty, forgiveness, and pardon, or remittal. In fact, it means the actual removal of the penalty or punishment. That is why, with humility, we must embrace the grace of Christ and realize that were it not for

his unconditional love we would be without hope or salvation. *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,"* 1 John 1:9.

Join me as I confess my sins to our omnipotent savior and receive his amazing grace.



Rev. Jonathan E. McCottry Sr. is the Pastor of Hays Prayer Chapel.

**"BUT IF WE WALK IN THE LIGHT, AS HE IS IN THE LIGHT, WE HAVE FELLOWSHIP ONE WITH ANOTHER, AND THE BLOOD OF JESUS CHRIST HIS SON CLEANSSES US FROM ALL SIN"
- 1 JOHN 1:7 (KJV)**