

**“The Self-Giving Loving Faithfulness of Our Lord” based on Genesis 15 and Luke 13:31-35
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on March 13, 2022, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

What we find in today’s readings is a revelation of the nature of God’s love for us. At the heart of this love is the notion of complete and even irrational self-sacrifice. Many great thinkers have objected to this love, calling it irrational, calling it undignified. They say is especially beneath a deity considered to be a sovereign god, who holds all power – the power to create, and power to destroy.

Yet, as we see in one of the earliest Hebrew scriptures and as it is affirmed by these words in the New Testament, this love is a love that is consistent in our picture of God, from the foundation of our faith. You see, this is the love of a God who does not need anything from the object of his love. That’s the beauty of Abram’s calling and the redemption that is found in Jesus.

You see, for God’s sake alone, none of this is necessary, yet God goes “all in” for us. This love offers protection and promise for us, at a cost only to God. This love is not earned, but is freely given, even when we reject it. While this sounds nice and it feels like this must be easy, the truth is that this kind of love is difficult for us. You see, we think of ourselves as rational, the ones who know good from evil. By human standards, a love like this just doesn’t make any sense.

In today’s reading from Luke, Jesus is warned that Herod Antipas wants to kill him. Herod Antipas was the ruler of the province of Galilee, where Jesus’s ministry started. Jesus has begun his journey to Jerusalem in Luke’s gospel, and perhaps, these Pharisees who may be allies, want him to get going a little faster. If he gets to Jerusalem faster, then Herod will have no authority. Pontius Pilate is in charge of Judaea, and they probably think, he’s awful, but he’s not Jewish, so he may not care about Jesus. Little do they know.

Jesus essentially tells them not to worry, a prophet like him won’t perish outside of Jerusalem. He explains that Jerusalem is certainly not a safe place, for that is where prophets die, where the people God has sent to minister to the city, were stoned to death. Jesus tells them to insult Herod – He calls him a fox – which like today, even then meant a sneaky, or untrustworthy, cunning person. And then Jesus compares himself to a fox’s frequent victim, calling himself a mother hen protecting her chicks. The hen will do what it can to protect its chicks, and ultimately, it will even give its life.

If we’re honest, Luke portrays Jesus as a bit unhinged here, not by God’s standards, but by our own human standards. That’s why critics of Jesus have called him an apocalyptic prophet with a death wish, and certainly, if we apply our logic and how humans think, this seems accurate. But Jesus is portraying his love like that of a mother hen, a crazy love that says, *‘even though you’ll be unprotected after, it is better to give my life right here and right now, yes, for any of you who come under my wings for help, because I’d rather that the fox eats me than eats you.’* The mother hen defends, but ultimately, will give her life to protect her chicks.

This is the same love we see in the story from Genesis, when the Lord makes a promise to Abram again. Namely, that even though he is old and married to a woman beyond child-bearing

age, they will be the parents to a massive nation – a light to all other nations. This kind of promise doesn't make sense – why make this promise now? God could have called Abram and Sarai earlier in their lives. God could make the same promise through Eliezer, a servant, and God could have let a child from a young woman, like the child, Ishmael, fulfill Abram's dreams. But no, God makes a ridiculous promise.

It's no wonder that step after step in our scripture today, Abram doubts and questions it. When the Lord says, "I'm your shield and your exceedingly great reward." Abram responds, 'Really? You say this? I still don't have the kid you promised. My only heir may have been born in my house, but among my servants. He is not my son. He is not mine and Sarai's child like you said.' So, the Lord takes Abram outside and promises him again, 'Eliezar won't be your heir, but look at all these stars, your offspring will be as numerous as they are.'

And here it says Abram believed, and that the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness, and what that means is God credited this faith to him as goodness and justice worthy of God's love and reward. All Abram did was believe – but honestly, he didn't do that very well at all. When the Lord said, 'I brought you out of Ur in the land of the Chaldeans, and in addition to this family, I'm going to give you land to possess.' Abram, our alleged paradigm of faith questions it again.

Seriously, by our standards, choosing Abram is irrational – he's too old, he's too dense – and at best, he 'kind of' believes this all-powerful deity talking to him, but not fully. Yet God doubles down on a promise to this wanderer, who offers nothing to God. God makes this huge promise up front and asks very little of Abram. What Abram gives, comes from his excess – a 3-year-old heifer, a 3-year-old female goat, a 3-year-old ram, and two birds. Abram cuts the big ones in half, shoos away vultures, and that's the end of his role. He then just falls asleep.

Add sleepy to the character traits that make Abram a really bad choice, if we're honest. And so, in the darkness, Abram comes to, and the Lord lays out a challenge – The Lord says, it's going to get worse. Your descendants, the ones you doubt whether or not you'll have them. Well, after I give them to you, they will be enslaved by another nation, but don't worry, I'll judge that nation and they will be restored.

Then in a moment that is easily missed, the Lord does the most irrational act of love of all here. You see, in the ancient near east, this is the kind of sacrifice that was used to make a binding covenant. As part of the deal, both parties would walk between the slaughtered animals. In doing so, they are saying that the fate of the animal will be their fate if they were to violate the covenant or not make good on a promise. Notice who doesn't walk through – Abram. Only the presence of the Lord, in the firepot and torch, pass through the center of the sacrifice. The Lord God says by this action, that I will give up my own life, if I do not keep the promise I made.

Of course, God keeps this promise and expands this promise by a sacrifice again, entering into humanity as a descendant of Abram, who will later become Abraham. In that sacrifice the Son of God, fully one with God the Father and the Spirit in all things, is emptied of divine power and prerogative, to suffer and die on a cross. Indeed, the God of Abraham became a child of

Abraham, so that all of humanity might share in an inheritance – adopted to be children of God by the gift of grace – and receive a share of God’s life, which is both abundant and eternal.

This past week, I stumbled upon the 1942 short story called, “Sorrow Acre,” by Isak Dinesen, That’s the pen name of the great Danish author Karen Blixen, who wrote ‘Out of Africa.’ Blixen’s writing is beautiful, and her stories are complex with philosophy, but she is certainly not someone writing a defense of Christianity.

Yet in this story, and another of her later works, we get an image of this kind of love, the love God has for us, against a backdrop of those who would scoff at it, because this kind of love is so irrational and tragic. It’s beneath God, and yet, so beautiful.

The story is set on the farm of an old Danish noble, a wise old man in need of an heir. He lost his wife and several children at a young age, leaving only him and his son. But his son was sickly and so they traveled all around Europe looking for a cure to save him. It worked for some time, and a marriage was even arranged for him at age 20, but he died. And so, the childless widower, married the fiancé of his son, in arrangement where all involved understood one goal, to preserve their fortune and status with an heir.

But amid the high society arrangements, a friend of his late son has been charged with arson, for burning down one of the old Danish noble’s barns the week before. The noble has the boy’s life in his hands – the judge will do whatever he asks. The options are imprisonment or forced consignment to the army, and either one is effectively a death sentence in that time and place. So, the child’s mother, Anne Marie, comes to the nobleman. She pleads for her son’s life, begging for mercy. But to the old man, mercy is irrational. So, instead, he makes a bargain with her. If she can plow an acre of rye, by herself, in one day, from sunup to sunset, her son will be free.

There is a lot of great dialogue in the story, especially between the old man and his nephew. The nephew, Adam, is a well-traveled young man who, if there is no heir born of the arranged marriage, would be heir to the estate, though he does not seem to really want that. And so, at one point they discuss the gods of the Norse people and compare them to the Greek gods and the Christian God, and the uncle has an interesting take. He claims the Greek gods as superior to any other, because they have sovereignty and wield their power, with retributive justice and authority, without humility or any real foe.

In this tragic short story, he speaks of tragedy as the highest privilege of humans. This is his rational view because it is the purview of earth only and never something the divine can or should endure. To grieve with or for a god is to annihilate the god and be an atheist, he says. He describes the gospel as the Christian God wishing to experience tragedy, but he says it is not valid, because he discounts the full humanity of Jesus. He discounts the kind of self-giving love, and mercy we see in Christ, as being beneath a god, and so, he says comedy is the only place, where the divine and the earthly can meet.

And so, when the nephew asks his uncle to stop this wager with the woman for her son, the uncle refuses, saying he gave his word, and Anne Marie would not respect him, if he stopped

now. If he just let the boy off and she was not required to complete her task, she might not feel fulfilled. The nephew pleads, recognizing that she will die in her endeavor, doing the work of three experienced workers all by herself. The nobleman, the uncle, refuses, holding his principles, and so the nephew threatens to leave forever. The uncle bids him farewell and keeps watching.

That's when the nephew sees the brokenness of his uncle, the great loss he has endured, and he has mercy on him, and he rationalizes staying, and chooses to remain, but he leaves the field saying he will come back, but he does not come back to see Anne Marie finish her task. Eventually, they bring the woman's son to her, and he follows her in the field, as she mows down every last sheath of rye in her path. And with only a few minutes to spare before sun-down, she completes her task, as she had promised.

The old man agrees to set her son free, but in the embrace of her sobbing son, she dies of exhaustion. She saved his life, but at the cost of her own, out of love.

My sisters and brothers, the world will say that this kind of love and mercy are not rational for anyone, but especially for a deity, a supreme god. But this is the kind of love that God has for you, and it is in God's very nature. This is the God we trust, the God of self-giving love – and this love is for you. It doesn't make sense from our human points of view, but the self-giving love of God is a full commitment, walking through the sacrifice for us, even if we don't deserve it. It covers us like a hen's shielding us with her wings to ward off the fox. This love is willing to share in our humanity and fully live in our limits, and die for us, whether in the fields like a mother saving her son, or on a cross of empire so that we might live, abundantly and eternally.

You are the Father's beloved, called to be loved as the Son and to love others by and through the Holy Spirit. We give of ourselves not because we have to do it in order to receive our God's love. We give of ourselves because we see how much we are loved, and we want to be a part of that love, God's self-giving love. To know that love, is to respond to it because we want to be a part of what God is doing to reconcile our world. Amen.