**“The kind of person who…”**

Luke 2: 26-38

December 19, 2016, David M. Griebner, Riverside UMC

I want to start with a story today that, to be fair, will hit close to home for some of you. This past Thursday I was with a small group of pastors and we watched a short video by Dallas Willard. Dallas told a story about a conversation someone he knew had with a man wife had just lost his wife after a long battle with Alzheimer’s disease. This man had cared for his wife for a number of years. In the course of the conversation this person offered his sympathy to the man for the loss of his wife. And that was fine. But then, as I recall, he added that he was also sorry for all those years the man was tied down caring for his wife. Do you know what the man said to that? He said here was no sorrow for those years, no regrets for the time spent; she was his wife and he was honored to do it. It was a blessing.

The reason Dallas told that story was because the video was about how Jesus longs to change our hearts. And he was trying to get us to wrestle with what that actually meant and whether we really wanted Jesus to truly change us. And so after telling the story, Dallas continued with a powerful question that I have been unable to forget. He asked, “So, what kind of person do you want to be? Do you want to be the kind of person who didn’t want to take care of a loved one when if they happened to get Alzheimer’s (or something else) or the kind of person who did?”

This is essentially the same kind of question we’ve wrestled with the past few weeks. For Advent we’ve been exploring a series of short phrases or thoughts from scriptures. The first week the phrase was “Increase our love.” (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13) The second week it was “Pure and Blameless.” (Philippians 1:9-11) and last week it was “Let your gentleness be evident to all.” (Philippians 4:4-7) Each of these short phrases asks a similar question of us to the one posed by Dallas.

Do we want to be the kind of person whose love is increasing? Do we want to be the kind of person who is becoming more and more pure and blameless in our thoughts and actions? Do we want to be able to embrace for ourselves and share with others a gentle trust in the goodness of God? (Repeat!)

Today I want us to see these three statements, or thoughts, all together. And I want you to see them for what they truly are. This is the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. This is who God longs for us to be; this is how God longs for us to live, now and for eternity. But it’s not just how we are called to live; it is how God has chosen to live with us, to love us, and to save us. We can see this in the passage we’ve read today when the

Gabriel is sent by God to a young girl named Mary to tell her that she had been chosen by God to bear the Messiah.

**Take the first phrase for example. Increase our love.** The apostle John says in one of his letters that we love because He (God) first loved us. (1 John 4:19) Let me try to capture this love for us. Imagine that there is someone you love deeply, someone you cherish above everyone else, someone with whom you have a relationship that is so precious to you that you cannot put a price on it. You have literally invested your whole heart in this person, trusted them with all your secrets, given them everything they needed to succeed. You’ve never abandoned them, never given up on them. You’ve’ gone to the well for them again and again and again. But they have broken your heart, betrayed your trust, and squandered your gifts, not just once, but many times. And nothing has ever really changed. What are you going to do? What are you going to do with that person? Are you going to insist they pay you back for what you’ve given them before you will give them anything more? Are you going to cut them off for good? Give up on them? Cut your losses, walk away, and protect your own heart from more pain and disappointment?

This is precisely our relationship with God. We’ve done all this and more in our relationship with Him. We were His deepest love and despite everything God gave us and everything God did for us, we broke His heart, betrayed His trust, and squandered His gifts. Not once, but again and again and again. So what did God do when we did all that? Did He cut us off, give up on us, or demand we get our act together before He did anything else for us? No that is not what He did. What did He do? He sent His Son to take away the sins of the world. God increased His love. That’s probably not the best way to picture it, because His love was always perfect, but it points us in the right direction. God increased His love for us until it couldn’t be increased any more, until it reached to the very heart of the Trinity itself. The Word of God, Jesus, became flesh, and dwelt among us. He came as the perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. That’s love, the only love that cannot be increased in any way.

**And take the second theme, purity**. What I’ve just described is the Gospel, the Good news of Jesus Christ, and it is the purest thing we can imagine. It’s pure love. It’s pure grace. It’s pure mercy. It’s pure freedom. It’s pure acceptance. It’s the pure sacrifice of the Son of God taking upon Himself all our sin and all our brokenness. And it is the pure joy of knowing that you know that it is true and you are free and accepted and loved beyond your wildest imagination

You’ve heard me mention Tim Keller here before. Tim is the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. He’s one of the leading pastors not just the United States, but the world. And I love listening to him because he is so clear about the Gospel. He captures it as pure as anyone I have ever heard. Often when Tim is trying to capture the beauty of the Gospel he will launch into a few lines from a hymn. They go like this.

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay*

*Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;*

*Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,*

*I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;*

*My chains fell off, my heart was free,*

*I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*

*My chains fell off, my heart was free,*

*I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*

I’ve heard Tim repeat those words many times and last night I finally looked them up to see where they came from. They are from a hymn written by none other than Charles Wesley. Listen to it again. (see above) Pure grace. Pure mercy. Pure joy. Pure Gospel.

**Finally take gentleness**. If our broken hearts are to receive the pure and perfect love God has to offer and if we really are as broken as the scriptures say we are, and if we are to actually see ourselves as needy as we truly are, God must come to us gently. So when God wanted to put His plan in motion, what did He do? Did He send an army? Did He recruit a King? No. He came to a young girl and told her she was going to have a baby. How gentle. How unintimidating. How gracious. How spacious.

A couple weeks ago Sande and I drove up to Amish country for the afternoon to do some Christmas shopping. As we set out I was expecting it to be nothing more than just a quick trip to accomplish something we needed to get do to be ready for Christmas. We did our shopping, bought some cheese, got lost, and passed dozens of buggies. And yet I can’t stop thinking about it. It turns out the trip wasn’t just about getting something done. There was something magical about that afternoon that triggered something in my heart and it left me longing for more of something. I can’t really put it into words, but I felt some kind of invitation when I passed those buggies. Maybe it was an invitation to be a little bit more gentle with others and myself, live a little more simply, trust a little more and slow down and pay more attention.

Increase our love. Make me pure and blameless. Let your gentleness be known to all. Love. Purity. Gentleness. Aren’t these the kind of things we long for in our lives? Don’t we all aspire to love and to be loved this way? And honestly, isn’t this the kind of person you hope you are becoming?

Increase our love. Make me pure and blameless. Let your gentleness be known to all. Don’t these capture the kind of person we truly long to be both now, and for all eternity? Don’t they help us to come a little closer to being that person now through the power of the Holy Spirit?

Love, purity, and gentleness. Praise God for the Gospel. Praise God for the Good News of Jesus Christ.