

FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL LIVING
Week 2: Session 1- Receiving God's Love
The Practice of Radical hospitality

Lent 1 Year C

Dt 26:1-11; Ps 91:1-2, 9-16; Rom 10:8b-13; Lk 4:1-13

Gladstone 10/03/2019

1 John 4:16b-21

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ **We love because he first loved us.** ²⁰ Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

There is an old story told about a king who ruled a far-off land. The king was a wicked man, who held everyone absolutely in his power. But the king had one great frustration. I wonder if you can guess what it was? This king, who could control every aspect of people's lives, was unable to break their belief in God. So he summoned all his wisest counsellors and asked them: "Where can I hide God so that people will end up forgetting him?" That's quite a question. How would you answer that kind of question? Well, here's what the king's "so called" wise men said.

The first said: "Hide God on the far side of the moon." That seems pretty good, it's a long way away. So they talked about it for quite a while, but finally decided it was a bad idea, because one day people would be able to fly in space and God would end up being found again. And we know that's true—men and women are able to travel in space and just recently, if I'm not mistaken, the Chinese have just landed a space craft on the far side of the moon.

Another advisor to the wicked king said: "Let's bury God in the depths of the ocean—maybe somewhere down below the Titanic." Again they talked it over and rejected the idea because, well, someday, people would be able to explore the ocean depths and God would be found again.

So the king's oldest and wisest advisor offered his idea. "Why don't we hide God in everyday life," he said. "No one will think of looking for God there. If we hide God in the ordinary events of everyone's lives they'll never find God." And so it was done. And you know what—they say that people are looking for God, even to this very day.

Very often we look for God in all the wrong places—and we forget that God can be found all around us—in a baby’s smile—in a comforting touch—in our attitudes and actions towards one another. We look for fulfilment in life through all kinds of things—through our possessions—through our families—even through our religion—yet life—real, abundant life—can only be found in Christ and in doing that which God calls us to do.

This Sunday is the first Sunday in Lent. It’s that period of 40 days just before Easter, when we are asked to examine our lives and make certain choices about how we should live them. It’s a time of repentance to be sure but it’s also a time of discovery—a time of discovering where God is hiding in our lives—a time of relying on God—a time of declaring to the world who we are in Christ.

The book of Deuteronomy reminds us that we are all on a journey—a journey to the promised land—that land flowing with milk and honey—the land of promise and fulfilment. The wilderness may be tough, but it’s not always a bad place, for it’s a place where we encounter, not only the tempter, as in our gospel reading, this morning, but also the grace of God. It’s the place where we are tested and where we, through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, are also able to overcome.

All of us who wish to know God more deeply must expect to be refined and strengthened through our experiences in the wilderness. How long are you willing to stay in the wilderness? As long as it takes to discover the real “you”? As long as it takes for the Spirit to shape you into who God wants you to be?

The wilderness is a part of our Christian life that we usually try to avoid or ignore. For most of us, journeying through the wilderness is a humbling experience—especially when we allow ourselves to become vulnerable—to allow yourself to be taken to a place where you must become totally reliant on God for your sustenance? The wilderness, however, is also a place where we can find peace through Christ and fulfilment for life’s journey.

As we commence, in proper, our Lenten studies, focussing around the *5 Practices of Fruitful Living*, we are confronted, not only, by Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness and the journey mentioned in Deuteronomy, but also by our own journey of faith at this particular time of the ecclesiastical year—as we seek to set ourselves right before God and before one another on our lead up to the events at Easter.

The particular passage from 1 John that I read at the beginning, contains the thrust for this part of our Lenten journey and the first aspect of the *5 Practices*. And that is, from verse 9 that, “we love because he first loved us.” This leads us to the first practice, “The Practice of Radical Hospitality” the practice of “receiving God’s love.” We usually think of

hospitality as something we engage in to make others welcome—and that’s certainly the thrust of the first practice of the, *5 Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, that we looked at a few years ago.

The essence of this practice for us, when we look at it from a personal perspective, in our relationship with God, is that in attempting to transform our own lives, we are unable to do so unless we allow God’s grace into our lives and so transform ourselves from the inside out. The personal practice of Radical Hospitality, then, begins with having a receptive attitude towards God—perceiving who God is and listening to his voice. It’s a readiness to accept and to welcome God’s initiative toward us—and to accept that we are accepted by God.

God's love for us is not something we have to strive for—we can’t earn it, we can’t work on it, nor should we fear it. It’s freely given, and that’s the key—that we are loved, first, finally, and forever by God, a love so deep and profound and significant that God offers his Son to signify and solidify this love forever so that we get it.

The journey to becoming what God wants us to be, begins with opening ourselves to this love, and giving it a place in our hearts. The journey begins when the God “up there” or “out there,” or the God whom we perceive as some philosophical abstraction, becomes a living truth and a love that we receive into ourselves. Our ability to welcome him into our lives, requires us to exercise an extraordinary kind of hospitality—a willingness to allow God to come in and dwell within our hearts. Until you get to that point, it will be impossible to extend true Christian hospitality to others. It’s called the mystery of grace—God accepting us, despite our rejecting, ignoring and rebelling against God’s love.

Faith, when you boil it down, is our acceptance of God’s gift of grace—the opening of our hearts to invite God's love into our lives. Faith is our receiving God’s grace, his love, and his pardon, and allowing these gifts to shape us and make us anew. Faith is the commitment again and again to live by grace, to honour the gift, and use it, and pass it along. Of course, the ultimate expression of God’s grace, is Jesus Christ—God becoming human in order to reach us and to it make possible for us to live abundant, meaningful, loving, and graceful lives.

The personal practice of Radical Hospitality begins with accepting God’s love for us, offered through Christ, and deciding to let that gracious love make a difference in our lives.

The regular personal practice of Radical Hospitality in this way, is sustained with deliberate behaviours—the pursuing of a deepening relationship with God through practices that place us in the best position to continue to welcome Christ and make room

for his grace in our lives. Radical Hospitality toward God involves both the attitude of receptivity and intentional practice.

People who cultivate this receptivity, look for ways to invite God in rather than to close God out—they deliberately seek to say Yes to the promptings of the Spirit rather than to deny or avoid them.

No doubt there are and will be many obstacles that try to prevent us from receiving God's love and so make us inhospitable to God's leading. The voice of God's love is constantly being drowned out by all the other voices in our society vying for our attention. This is why we talk about having spiritual practices that help centre out thoughts and minds on the things that matter—that help us to hear God's call on our lives and reaffirm his grace towards us.

The thick, rich, lasting notion of a good life—of life that is abundant and fruitful—comes from deeper sources than society can offer. This abundant life grows from the awareness that God loves us, and from the persistent soul work, the repeated opening of ourselves to God to let ourselves be changed, and from loving and being loved by others.

What is the purpose and end for which we were created? What is trustworthy and true? Who am I? How does God fit in to it all? The answers to these questions do not come from outside of us. We never earn enough, do enough, or achieve enough to guarantee happiness. We do not become what God created us to be simply by more activity, faster motion, working harder, or having more stuff. More intensity on these external activities does not satisfy the soul.

And contrary to self-help books, the good life cannot come from inside us by our own efforts either. We do not achieve it by trying harder, pushing further, pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Self-love, self-absorption, and self-focus do not take us there.

Happiness, meaning, and contribution can only come from our connecting to the source of life, from the grace we've become accustomed to shutting out and denying by our distraction, clutter, and self-will. The good life comes from the practice of hospitality toward God, opening ourselves to God, and making room in our hearts for the gift-like transformation God's love makes possible.

Accept that you are accepted. The first step toward fruitful living involves saying Yes to God's unconditional love toward us. God's love changes everything. When you open yourself, God's grace stimulates a passionate desire to love God in return, and this takes us to the second practice of fruitful living, that we'll be looking at next week: Passionate Worship. To God be all glory, honour majesty and praise. Amen.