

“JESUS LOVES ME”

Romans 8:35-39; John 15:12-15; 1 John 4:7-12,16-21

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“Jesus Loves Me, This I Know.” Nearly all of us associate this sweet song with childhood and a simple, childlike faith. When Jerry and I were planning this sermon series inspired by hymns of the church, we chose this one as kind of counterpoint to the more somber mood and complex theology and challenging themes of “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded,” which Jerry reflected on two weeks ago. Well, you know what they say about plans! As I thought about the words of “Jesus Loves Me,” I started to realize that the “simple” message of this song has a surprising depth to it. It gave me a lot to ponder – so much that this morning I’m only going to talk about the first verse!

The great 20th century theologian Karl Barth is famously supposed to have said that everything he wrote and taught and believed about the Christian faith could be summed up in the first line of this song: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” I’ll leave it up to you to decide whether that captures the essence of *your* faith, but for sure there’s a lot to unpack in those words.

“Jesus loves me.” This is where we start, or if we don’t start there, it’s the place we need to get back to in order to make a fresh start. This is the foundation, the prerequisite, the first developmental stage, the seed, the heart. Some people might say you start with the Ten Commandments or with the realization that you’re a sinner or with the question of who Jesus is. But they are wrong. The first thing you have to know is that Jesus loves you. You. There’s really very little point in going any further into the Christian faith until you grasp this one key thing, because everything else flows from it. Not only that, you’re likely to misunderstand everything else – Jesus’ call, Jesus teachings, Jesus’ cross – if you don’t look at them through that lens of Jesus’ love for you. Jesus loves you, not because you are related to somebody. Not for anything you’ve done. Just for you. Therefore, you matter. You have value and dignity. Your life has meaning and purpose. You are made in the image of God and you are loved. Think how lives would change – think how the *world* would change - if we all remembered that, every single day.

“Jesus loves me, this I know.” None of us really feels this all the time, of course. But notice that the song asserts it as something *known*, not something *felt*. It’s true, when we feel it *and* when we don’t. This song helps us claim and hold on to that knowledge. It’s not unlike a creed, I think. It not only states a belief, it plays a role in helping us hold and internalize and become more secure in that belief which is at the heart of Christian faith.

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” What does the Bible tell us? No verse actually says exactly this, but the whole gospel rests on that message. We

see Jesus loving his friends and disciples, demonstrating love through healing and acceptance, and above all dying a terrible death with only love and forgiveness – no hate or anger – toward the human beings whose sin and blindness brought it about. That the motivation for all this was love is a major theme of John’s gospel, of the epistles that bear John’s name, and also of the writings of the Apostle Paul. But just about every scripture passage that talks explicitly about Jesus’ love for us says the same thing about its implications: Jesus loves us; therefore we are to love one another. We are to love our sisters and brothers in the church. We are to love our neighbors. We are to love our enemies. We are loved; the natural corollary is that we love. We could have a long discussion about whether that’s because it’s what Jesus taught, or because we want to be like him, or simply because being loved changes us. But the connection is repeated so often in the New Testament that it’s impossible to deny. So when I affirm that “Jesus loves me,” I cannot understand this as simply a personal and private claim of belonging to Jesus. It’s not just about “me.” The love of Jesus for each one of us connects us not just to him but to each other. “Jesus loves me” is the beginning, but the story doesn’t end there.

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong.” Little ones. Hmm. Little ones belong to Jesus? Little ones in cages at the border? The 25 per cent of little ones in Kalamazoo County who live in poverty? African-American little ones who are much more likely to die before their first birthdays than white babies? Little ones whose drinking water isn’t safe? Little ones starving in Sudan? Little ones whose homes have been bombed with U.S.-made weapons in Yemen? The millions of little ones stranded in refugee camps because rich countries refuse to receive them? Little ones whose underfunded schools now hold regular active shooter drills? They belong to Jesus, too, as much as the children we love do, as much as each one of us does. If we must love because Jesus loved us, don’t we have to see all the “little ones” who belong to Jesus as somehow belonging to us, too? And maybe “little ones” aren’t just the children, but all the vulnerable, and any of us when we are vulnerable, which all of us are at some time in our lives.

If you are surprised that this simple little song has taken us to these big and difficult challenges... well, so was I. But isn’t that what often happens when we start delving into what the Bible tells us and what our faith teaches?

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak.” It’s comforting to see ourselves in this song at the beginning, to feel wrapped up in its message of unconditional love and belonging. But it’s less comfortable to place ourselves into it here. We are conditioned to deny and reject weakness and vulnerability, to be (or pretend to be) strong. In our society, the strong are respected and the weak are despised. But vulnerability is part of being human. Self-sufficiency is an illusion. And it’s a given of faith that all of us – not only when we are “little ones” – come to God empty-handed and in need of grace. The song should really say “we are weak” not “they.”

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak but he is strong.” The song urges us to lean on Jesus who not only loves us but offers us strength. Is it suggesting that Jesus will rescue or protect us from whatever threatens us? If it is, I’m not sure that’s quite what the Bible tells us. In those well-known verses from the letter to the Romans, for example, the Apostle Paul assures us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus... but doesn’t actually promise rescue from famine, peril, persecution, powerful enemies, and the like. Maybe the point is that Jesus power can sustain us through all those struggles and sorrows and challenges we don’t feel ourselves strong enough to meet.

But here is another interesting thing the Bible tells us: That Jesus *gave up* power to live as one of us, that God chooses what is weak to shame the strong, that the cross of Jesus is foolishness to the world but the power of God to those who believe. The Bible – and in fact all that we know and believe about Jesus’ life – causes us to question our assumptions about what is weak and what is strong; it blurs those distinctions. Jesus’ strength may not be of the knight-in-shining-armor-vanquishing-the-enemies variety... think instead of the strength of compassion, the strength of truth, the strength to forgive and endure and believe. And our weakness might not be merely passive helplessness, but the unlikely vehicle through which God’s power and grace is at work, the “clay jars” that carry the treasure of the gospel message.

It’s a short song; it only takes a couple of minutes to sing it. But it takes a lifetime to unpack and absorb the implications of its simple message. We’ll sing it now, but I hope you will go on singing it, and reflecting on it, and letting the good news that is in this song challenge and change you.

“JESUS LOVES ME”

Jesus loves me, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong.
They are weak but he is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus loves me,
The Bible tells me so.