

“LOVE DIVINE”

Psalm 103:1-11; Ephesians 3:14-21

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“Some of us embrace the Bible with our hearts, which is right to do, and yet we do not bring disciplined minds into the process. Sometimes the reverse is true: we apply first-rate minds to the Bible and yet fail to be sensitive to what the Word is whispering to our hearts. In the end, it is not a heart problem, nor is it a head problem. It is an *integration* problem. We must ask the Lord to help us bring our whole self to the task of listening to the Bible.”¹

I wish I'd said that. I did say something like that in a sermon a few months ago and it's been my approach to the Bible for as long as I can remember. But these words belong to Michael Card in his commentary on the gospel of Luke. For him, the tool we use to bring head and heart together is the imagination. I wish I'd said that too.

When Card mentioned bringing “our whole self” to our reading of scripture, I thought immediately of our intention statement: “At Westminster Church we live a whole life...” Integration is not only an important task for interpreting the Bible, but it's vital to the life of faith as well. “Love your neighbor” is not just something we talk about in church. We try to live it out at home, at school, in the office. And it's not just an intellectual exercise of determining the right set of actions that express love for neighbor. Love is, of course, not logical, but something we put our whole selves into.

One of the ways the church has always tried to integrate head and heart is to sing our faith. We take the words and the ideas of scripture and turn them into a poem with meter to which we arrange a particular tune. You may have heard the expression that “singing is praying twice.” Well, singing is also one way in which we internalize scripture. We are essentially reading scripture a second time with different “eyes” when we sing the faith.

My hope as we talk about these hymns and songs of the church is that our faith will be deepened and that we will in fact experience what it is to bring our whole self to the life of faith.

“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” is a great hymn for turning scripture into song. Walter Brueggemann calls it “a well-nigh perfect hymn that sounds all the great notes of evangelical faith...” The opening words of the hymn express the great theme that runs throughout the Bible. The psalm we read this morning speaks of God “abounding in steadfast love.” Paul prays that the church at Ephesus will be “rooted and grounded in love” and desires that they come to “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.”

We're not surprised that the psalm already reads like poetry because it was intended to be sung and the translators have done a good job of preserving that sense. But Ephesians also has that musical quality that helps us see not only the truth of the words, but their beauty as well. So the ideas move easily into the song.

Paul prays that “Christ may dwell in your hearts.” The hymn sings: “Jesus, Thou art all compassion, Pure, unbounded love thou art; Visit us with the salvation, Enter every trembling heart.”

The scripture speaks of the “riches of God’s glory.” The hymn sings of a love “excelling,” and offers us a share of God’s glory: “Let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee; changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place...”

The scripture reminds us that God is able to accomplish far more than we can imagine, while the hymn leaves us “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

The psalm speaks of a God who “forgives... heals... and redeems.” The hymn sings: “Take away the love of sinning; Alpha and Omega be; End of faith, as its beginning, Set our hearts at liberty.”

Charles Wesley was a master at taking the words and ideas of scripture and making them sing in a way that touches the whole person. As with many of the old hymns, the doctrine of the Trinity makes its presence known. Creator, Christ and Spirit are all there, but not in some abstract formulation. Instead, the “three persons” form the backdrop against which we experience the fullness of God’s presence.

Verse 1 focuses on the Jesus, “the joy of heaven to earth come down,” the one whose compassion is complete, whose love is unbounded. In faith we ask him to dwell in our humble and trembling heart. There’s nothing in the hymn about Jesus’ teaching or miracle-working. It’s not that those things are unimportant, but Wesley goes straight to the main point: the relationship. It’s intimate and intense. It’s about allowing the joy and love of God to be known to our whole self.

Verse 2 focuses on the Holy Spirit. “Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit” recalls the creation story where God breathes life into our flesh. Each breath we take should remind us of God’s commitment to life and love. The Spirit speaks to all aspects of life, even the troubles we face, the rest we so often feel a need for. The Spirit works within us to make us better people. The Spirit is determined to make us free. Again this is intimate, addressing our “troubled breast” and setting “our hearts at liberty.

Verse 3 focuses on God the Creator who delivers, gives us life, joins us in our sacred spaces, and inspires in us a desire to bless, serve, pray, praise, and glory “in perfect love.”

Verse 4 expresses the hope of our faith, that our connection to God would be fully restored. This is, as Paul wrote, “more than we can imagine.” But Wesley tries anyway. “Finish, then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be; let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee; changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

The love of God is one amazing thing. Singing it makes it seem more real. Singing it touches our hearts, minds and souls. Singing it is part of the whole life we discover through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God our creator. Amen.

¹ Michael Card, *Luke: the Gospel of Amazement*, Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove IL, 2011. p.13

² Walter Brueggemann. *A Glad Obedience: Why and What We Sing*. Westminster John Knox: Louisville KY, 2019. p.113