

Psalm 98 (CEB)

Sing to the Lord a new song because he has done wonderful things! His own strong hand and his own holy arm have won the victory! The Lord has made his salvation widely known; he has revealed his righteousness in the eyes of all the nations. God has remembered his loyal love and faithfulness to the house of Israel; every corner of the earth has seen our God's salvation. Shout triumphantly to the Lord, all the earth! Be happy! Rejoice out loud! Sing your praises! Sing your praises to the Lord with the lyre—with the lyre and the sound of music. With trumpets and a horn blast, shout triumphantly before the Lord, the king! Let the sea and everything in it roar; the world and all its inhabitants too. Let all the rivers clap their hands; let the mountains rejoice out loud altogether before the Lord because he is coming to establish justice on the earth! He will establish justice in the world rightly; he will establish justice among all people fairly.

1 John 5:1-6

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born from God. Whoever loves someone who is a parent loves the child born to the parent. This is how we know that we love the children of God: when we love God and keep God's commandments. This is the love of God: we keep God's commandments. God's commandments are not difficult, because everyone who is born from God defeats the world. And this is the victory that has defeated the world: our faith. Who defeats the world? Isn't it the one who believes that Jesus is God's Son? This is the one who came by water and blood: Jesus Christ. Not by water only but by water and blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.

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For the majority of my adult life, I've been a firm believer in the power of food to unite people. While I'm sure there were moments earlier, it was during my time in Korea, where my fondest memories are of sharing meals with others, that I really began to understand how transformative a shared meal can be. Liz and I developed stronger relationships with our colleagues over shared meals of Korean Barbeque, we made friends with neighbors who wanted to practice their English, so they'd tread us to dinner and make conversation over our meal, and my relationship with my students, particularly the preschool students with whom I ate lunch several times a week, was made better by the food we shared. I tend to think food can build bridges over all that might divide people; it did there, it did throughout my time in seminary where just about every event included a meal of some sort, and it has in my ministry here as we've gathered at fellowship lunches or as I've had you to my home for dinner. But as Liz and I have taken on a new role in our lives, that of foster parents, my tune has begun to change a little bit - I haven't stopped believing in the power of food, I've just discovered it's a more limited power than I had believed. Because we're caring for a child who hasn't had much variety in his diet other than junk food, and because he is on the autism spectrum which can bring with it all kinds of food related particularities, dinners are hard. We won't allow chicken nuggets, pizza, and candy at every meal, and because we don't, we end up fighting about every dinner. We follow the method of providing familiar foods alongside new foods so that dinner time isn't too overwhelming, though nearly 5 months in, I'm not sure we've been successful at getting too many of those new foods tried, especially if it's a vegetable. We have found the case where food is not the unifier I've believed it to be. In this case, food isn't breaking down boundaries, it's creating them. For someone who likes almost everything, it's hard to wrap my mind around all this. But when you're sharing a roof with a picky eater, you learn a few things. It turns out, there isn't one

thing that can unite all people. There are lots of things that can have the potential to unite, but they can just as easily cause division. Music can unite lots of people, I'm not sure I know many people who don't like music, but we can also have really strong opinions about music and just as easily get divided over styles and artists. Shared values unite communities and nations, but when adhering to those values becomes rigid and extreme, they're more likely to cause factions to form - this is the current state of politics in America. If there is nothing that can unite us, do we have any hope?

I know I just said that there is nothing that can unite us all, but that was hyperbole. There is, in fact, one thing that can unite all of us - faith. That might sound ridiculous to you, as we're all too familiar with the factions that have formed in faith communities around the world, factions over theology, social practices, worship styles, clergy, and much more. And though proponents of each of those groups will try and convince you otherwise, they aren't actually fights about faith. They are petty fights all about who can be more right, and the point of our faith isn't to be the most right. The point of our faith is unity in Christ and, most importantly, love. Anything that detracts from unity and love isn't faith. This is the point that the author of 1 John has gotten to at the end of his letter and why he was so insistent on naming and defining what love is. If God is love, and we are commanded by God to love one another, our faith in God (who, again, is love) will lead us to a kind of unity that isn't able to be broken by petty squabbles. We know this to be true because it united John's community against much worse, and if they could stand united, and victorious, against hate, persecution, and death, we can unite despite such unimportant trivialities like who is able to become a pastor, when someone can be baptized, and what kind of instruments are used in worship.

But before we can get to the unity of our faith, there's a rather large point we need to understand that will help clarify how we are to live in that unity. Up to this point in 1 John we've heard all about light and love - God is light, and in God's light there can be no darkness; God is love, and we are commanded to love one another. And we've heard affirmation that we have been claimed as children of God. Amid all the repetitions of light and love, it's important not to lose sight of that last point. 1 John 5 begins with a reminder that because of our faith in Jesus we are God's children, and then goes on to make a new point based on that truth - to love a parent is to love the children of that parent. This may not always be true in our social interactions, I'm sure you've loved someone who had children that were little hellions that you actively avoided, but when it comes to God it's different. It's different because God chose to love us despite our being hellions, and we're all equally undeserving of God's love. So, if we love God, who chooses to love us despite everything, and we love Christ, who is God's son and who has shown us how much we are loved by God, we are to love God's other children, too. Notice that there is no other qualifier for our love. It's not, love God's children so long as they look like you, worship like you, vote like you, eat the same food as you, etc. It's if you love God, you must also love all those whom God has claimed as God's children, end of story. John even goes as far as saying that it's only by loving God's children that you are able to say with any certainty that you love God. That is a mighty big claim in and of itself, but then he really lays it out, saying that following God's commandments isn't difficult. There are centuries of Christian exploration all about how we are to better follow the commandments of God, and here is John saying, "you know, it's not all that hard, stop making it so hard!" The audacity of this guy. But he's exactly right. We don't need monuments of the 10 commandments all over the place to keep us grounded in what God expects of us, we need only love. Love of our neighbors fulfills all the commandments, and in fulfilling the commandments, we love God. It's as simple as that. And if that kind of love is the fullness of our faith, we will find victory over the world, which is to say all those things that stand in opposition to God.

It sounds so simple, but simple can be deceiving. It goes beyond the difficulty of loving others - we all get how hard that can be. The biggest challenge for us, which is what makes loving others so difficult, is the centrality of Christ in all things. Jesus has to be the center of all we are and all we do, because it's from Jesus that we even begin to understand what love is and how we are to love our neighbors. You

may be asking, "Why would it be difficult to keep Jesus central?" It's difficult because we often get so wrapped up in our own stuff that we forget who Jesus even is. You could easily look at this from a larger cultural lens, but to make it a little more real, let's look at it from the lens of our church. How often are we keeping the reality of who Jesus was and is at the center of all that we do together? We certainly say "Jesus" a lot in worship, but invoking the name of Jesus isn't the same as keeping him central to our lives. The bigger questions are these: can we see Jesus present in the decisions made by our Session? Can we see Jesus in the welcome we give strangers who show up to worship with us? Can we see Jesus in the administration of the business side of the church? Is our mission program driven by Christ? If you're having to think really hard about it, it means it probably isn't true. The presence of Christ, the same Christ who fed whoever around him was hungry, who healed whoever near him was hurting, who defied every rule about "right practice of religion" in order to show love and grace, who died that we might live, should be obvious to all. Keeping Jesus in the center is more often than not inconvenient. But being Christian isn't about convenience; being a Christian is about changing our lives and the world around us to match God's vision, a vision we know because of Christ.

I try really hard to keep Christ in the center of all I do, especially in my leadership in the church, but I'm imperfect and I don't always get it right. I've let emotions get the better of me, causing my words and actions to hurt others. I've let my excitement for what could be drive my decisions instead of thoughtfully and prayerfully considering what is best. My ego too often gets moved to the center when that's where Christ should be. When the Session meets, we always begin with prayer and devotion to try and ground us, but the Session isn't perfect. We're apt to give a hearty "amen!" to the words of Christ we hear in the devotion and then, when faced with the reality of our desires or finances, we convince ourselves that other ways of being are best. As much as I'd like to call out the larger culture for not keeping Jesus central, we have to look at ourselves first and realize that we're to blame. We're often quick to say that the ills of society are all because we've kicked God out of schools, or some other nonsense, when we've kicked Christ from the center of who we are. Nothing will change around us if we do not have Jesus central to our lives. None of us is perfect, but we don't need to be perfect to keep Christ in the center of who we are and what we do. In fact, it's only because we're imperfect that Jesus being in our center makes a difference. Our faith is all about Jesus, the Jesus who is the son of God and the embodiment of God's love. It is this faith, and only this faith, that can bring us the kingdom of God.

We have the power, and the responsibility, to refuse all else in order to proclaim that Jesus is Lord, and if he is Lord, then his love is all we are and all we need. It is this love that unites us as the body of Christ and makes us victorious over hate. It is this love that makes us victorious over poverty, over warfare, over death itself. Our faith in Christ gives us reason to stand and shout, as our Psalm proclaimed. The love of God, through Christ, is victory. So, let it be your victory. Let it be the purpose of your life and the means by which you live your life. Let it be your center, so that all you are and all you do comes, first and foremost, from Christ. It is our faith in Christ that can unite us so that we can stand together and know that there is nothing that can divide us. And if there's nothing that can divide us, we have nothing to fear. Thanks be to God. Amen.