

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
May 10, 2009
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Nourishing Faith and Love
Acts 8:26-40, John 15:1-8, I John 4:7-21

Nourishing Faith and Love are vital to our becoming healthy human beings. Our Bible recognizes this many times over. The word, faith, in some form is mentioned in the Bible almost 500 times, and the word love, in some form is mentioned in the Bible over 800 times. So faith and love have great importance in our Bible and Christian faith. However, faith and love are never mentioned lightly like they are so often used in our society, today. In the Bible they are taken very seriously because God is the source of both of them. Faith is a gift from God through the Holy Spirit as Paul tells us in I Corinthians. I John tells us that love is from God; that God is the initiator of love for us and in us. This faith and love from God nourishes us, and helps us to grow in body and spirit as no other kind of faith and love can do.

The gospel lesson from John tells us how we can receive this nourishing faith and love of God. We are to abide in Jesus. To abide in Jesus is to trust in him, believe in him and to follow him. To abide in Jesus is to be attached to him like a branch is to a vine. The vine is the part of the plant that draws the nourishment from the ground to feed the branches. Jesus is our connection to God that gives us life and nourishes faith and love in us. I like how Bible professor Wayne Brouwer describes this connection to Jesus and God. "Our very spiritual genes are spliced into God through Jesus. ...when we remain connected to the source of our existence, the RNA of his Spirit ensures that life flows throughout our mortal veins." "Emphasis," May/June 2006

Our vine-like connection to God in Jesus Christ is more extensive than we can imagine. There is an example of such a massive nourishing connection found in God's world of nature. This example is "called Pando or The Trembling Giant. It is a clonal colony of a single male Quaking Aspen tree located in Utah. All the trees in the colony are determined to be part of a single living organism by identical genetic markers, and one massive underground root system. The plant is estimated to weigh collectively 6,000 tons or twelve million pounds, placing it as the heaviest known organism in existence. The root system of Pando is estimated to be among the oldest known living organisms in existence at 80,000 years of age." Our nourishing connection to God in Jesus Christ is older and even more extensive than this. (clipmarks.com)

All these genetic and nourishing connections also remind me of how we are attached to and nourished by our mothers when we are in the womb. What our mothers eat, drink, feel and breathe can have a great deal to do with our development as babies in the womb; a great reason to be thankful for good moms. In the same way we are to abide in Jesus so we can receive the nourishing faith and love of God.

We must not take this nourishing faith and love of God lightly or carelessly. You see, this nourishing faith and love is a very expensive one. We know this because as I John tells us, "God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the

atonement sacrifice for our sins." As we have learned over the past couple of weeks, when Jesus shed his blood dying on the cross for our sins, he made an atonement for our evil ways. He made us as one with God again. He was the expiation for our sins. In the sacrifice of his life, he cleaned up our sins, and pruned our dead branches when we could not do it for ourselves. We must not take this nourishing faith and love of God lightly or carelessly. You see this nourishing faith and love is very expensive.

A poet by the name of Myra Brooks Welch wrote a famous poem about this expensive nourishing faith and love of God that redeems us when we cannot do it for ourselves. The poem is titled: *'The Touch Of The Master's Hand'*

'Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer, Thought it scarcely worth his while To waste much time on the old violin, But held it up with a smile. "What am I bidden, good folks," he cried, "Who'll start the bidding for me?" "A dollar, a dollar. Then two! Only two? Two dollars, and who'll make it three?"

"Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice; Going for three..." But no, From the room, far back, a grey-haired man Came forward and picked up the bow; Then wiping the dust from the old violin, And tightening the loosened strings, He played a melody pure and sweet, As a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer, With a voice that was quiet and low, Said: "What am I bid for the old violin?" And he held it up with the bow. "A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two? Two thousand! And who'll make it three? Three thousand, once; three thousand, twice, And going and gone," said he.

The people cheered, but some of them cried, "We do not quite understand. What changed its worth?" Swift came the reply: "The touch of the Master's hand."---- And many a man with life out of tune, And battered and scarred with sin, Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd Much like the old violin.

A "mess of pottage," a glass of wine, A game -- and he travels on. He is "going" once, and "going" twice, He's "going" and almost "gone." But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd Never can quite understand The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought By the touch of the Master's hand. -- Myra Brooks Welch

In such a manner, God the master spared no expense to change our lives with his nourishing faith and love. Have you been touched by the master's hand? If you and I have been touched, how then shall we respond? What kind of tune will our life play? Jesus tells us how we are to respond. He said: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." Yes, our connection to Jesus and his nourishing faith and love is to cause us to bear fruit and have our lives be in tune with the ways of Jesus.

What does this fruit look like and what is the sound of the tune? The passage from Acts is a great example. First we have "Philip, one of the newly appointed deacons of the Jerusalem congregation. Thus he was an early convert and a recognized leader within the Jerusalem church. Second, we have the empowering of the Spirit, who is The Touch of the Master's Hand" working powerfully in the life of Philip in the form of an angel of God guiding him to make this journey. Finally, along the way he is again instructed clearly by the Spirit of God to join an Ethiopian Eunuch in his chariot. So Philip ran up to it and heard the Eunuch reading from the prophet

Isaiah. The Eunuch was reading a passage from Isaiah 53: 7-8 “where the suffering servant of God is described as the lamb unjustly slain for the sins of the people.” Philip asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The Eunuch replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” What a powerful plea that was. Philip then told the Eunuch that this suffering servant in Isaiah is now known as Jesus Christ who gave his life as the sacrificial lamb of God. The Spirit led the Eunuch to believe and be baptized. Baptism is an outward sign that we are sealed—that is eternally connected to God. So as a result of Philip being nourished by the faith and love of God in Jesus Christ, and being touched by the hand of the master, Philip was made part of the vine. By the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, Philip then bore fruit by ministering to the question and need of the Ethiopian Eunuch by testifying about Jesus. The Eunuch, having been nourished by the faith and love of God or touched by the master’s hand now understood and believed in Jesus Christ. He too was made a part of or sealed to the vine. I expect that he went out to Ethiopia to bear fruit. This is what the fruit of the vine looked like. This was the resulting joyful sound of the tune. “Emp,” M/Je 2006, Texts For Preaching Year B.

This is the kind of fruit the nourishing faith and love of God through Jesus Christ can cause us to bear. We are to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others. We are to be open to the Spirit or the touch of the master’s hand to lead us to those circumstances where the gospel can be shared in word or deed. The exciting display in the parlor of what our children have learned about the Christian faith in Sunday school is an example of the nourishing faith and love of God working its way from the vine into the branches of our teachers to share the good news with the children. It was expensive in that the teachers, both youth and adults, along with Caroline Carver as Children’s Ministry Director had invested many hours of preparation as well as teaching to nurture our children up to this point. Parents were a key to all of this happening for they encouraged and brought their children to the place where their questions of faith could be answered: Where the vow made at their child’s baptism to raise their child in the Christian faith was being fulfilled: Where the children would learn again that they are a vital part of the vine called Jesus and know of his love and salvation. This, my friends is bearing the fruit of God.

Sharing the nourishing faith and love of God and bearing this fruit does not stop at these doors. Let me take you back to Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch to illustrate this. First of all Philip was a Jew and the Eunuch was a Gentile. Jews and Gentiles did not necessarily mingle well. Secondly, Eunuchs were considered unclean by Jewish law, so the Eunuch would not have been allowed to worship in the temple at all. Thirdly, Ethiopia was considered the end of the world and the people from there were thought to be vastly inferior. So the Ethiopian Eunuch was most likely feared and hated. But as I John tells us, there is no fear in the nourishing faith and love of God. “Perfect love casts out fear.” It also teaches us, “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. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” As we heard, in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, the nourishing faith and love of God in Jesus Christ overcame all the fears and hatred to bring freedom, and

joyful grace to both of them—and to the billions of us who have heard this story over the centuries.

This past Friday, during the Day of Giving outreach to the community, this church and hundreds of our fellow citizens of all races and creeds bore fruit outside of our walls, whether they be physical, cultural or religious to help nourish others in need. That was bearing very good fruit. In fact, the signup sheet for volunteers from this church filled up so fast, there was no room on it for this pastor to sign his name. Well done! However, I was able to substitute for my wife who had been away. The Day of Giving, like the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, is how the nourishing faith and love of God in Jesus Christ overcame all the fears and hatred to bring freedom, and joyful grace to all in Cheyenne. By the way, our participation in the Cheyenne Interfaith Hospitality Network is the same story.

Now just one more point in today's scripture lessons about the nourishing faith and love of God in Jesus Christ. I John 4:12 nails it down well. "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." In other words, once we abide in Jesus, once "our very spiritual genes are spliced into God through Jesus," and the nourishing faith and love of God flows through our veins, we become the face of God to others who have never seen God. Stunning isn't it. Yes, what we say and do in our Christian witness in our homes, schools, business, churches, sporting events, wherever is to reflect the face of God to others. When we don't, that is why Jesus died-to clean us up. When we do, then the nourishing faith and love of God in Jesus Christ is flowing through us like life giving fluid in a vine does to the branches. By the master's touch, the Spirit of God, may we be the face of God to the world.