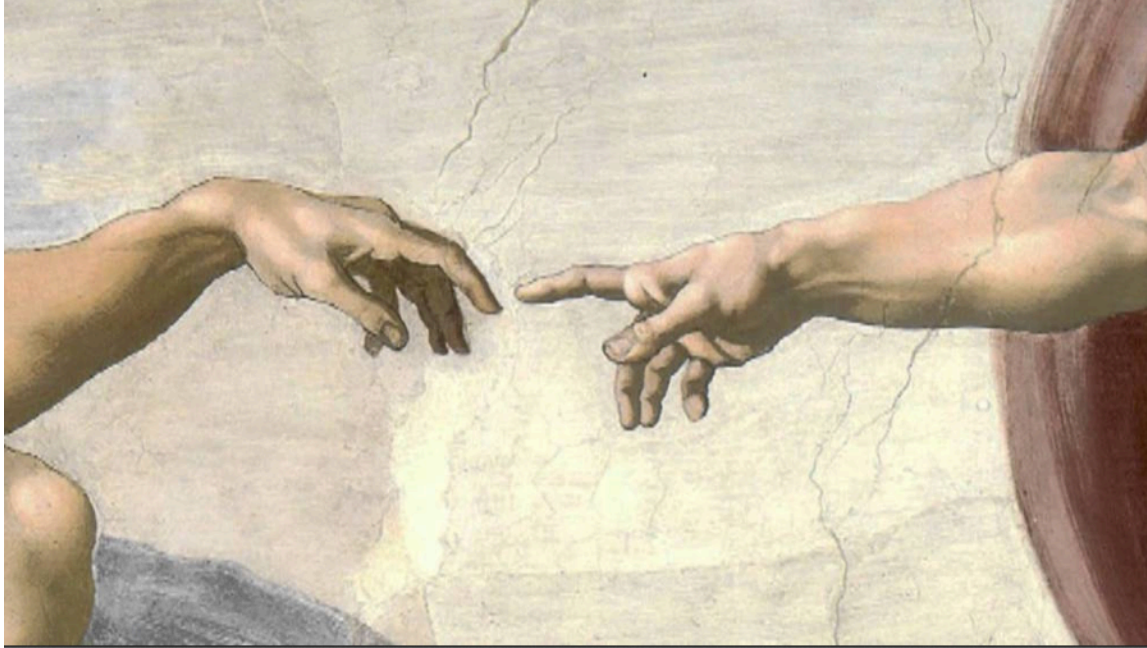

Take Hold of This Faith

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 25 June 2023

Genesis 21:8-21 • Romans 6:1-11 • Matthew 10:24-39



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

In Paul's letter today, he writes to the Romans, "Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." Being alive to God in Christ means that we receive both love and punishment. Jesus makes this clear in his somewhat troubling speech to the disciples in chapter ten of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is sending the disciples out and gives them instruction on how they should preach to the people in the towns they enter, and the things they need to beware of. The risk is always countered by the reward: in verse 22 he says, "All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved." The message of peace, the Good News of salvation, will not be universally received with the joy it should inspire. People will ridicule and persecute disciples of Christ. It happened in Jesus's time; it happened as Paul and Peter sought to spread the word around the Mediterranean countries; and it still happens today. Living in the Spirit is both a joy and a responsibility. In proclaiming his word, Jesus tells us to make known that which is hidden; to speak in the daylight; to proclaim from the rooftops. Do not

be afraid of your persecutors, he tells us. They can only harm your body; not your soul. (Matt 10:26-28)

Thus Jesus offers us consolation. God knows us intimately and loves us unconditionally, right down to each individual hair on our heads. And whoever acknowledges Jesus in this lifetime will be recognised by God in heaven. Do we take this to heart? Will we be made known to our Father in heaven, and recognised among those who spread the Good News? Let's think about these things, and think about how we, like the early disciples, will follow Jesus's instructions.

Jesus also tells us today that we must love him. I think we understand that; we love Jesus for Jesus gives us life, sustains our life, and promises eternal life. But we are not to just love him; we are to love him more than anyone else: more than our parents, more than our children. This is very hard, and seems unfair, in a sense, since we are naturally given love in our hearts for our family. The love of a mother or father for a child is ingrained in us; it is part of us. It's a design feature of the human system! If parents didn't love their children, I doubt we would survive as a species. We think that all babies are adorable. All babies are cute. And yet, looked at objectively, some babies — well ... but that's unkind. The point is we naturally love our children, and want to take care of them and give them what is best for them to grow and be healthy and happy.

Countering that strong natural urge is no small thing. And Jesus is not asking us not to love our children. We are just supposed to love him more. Maybe we should think of it like this. Consider the strong love you have for your children (or your parents, or brothers and sisters). Can you imagine loving Jesus just as much as that? Can you imagine loving Jesus just a little bit more?

One reason this is so difficult is that we're talking about different kinds of love. Jesus says to love him more than your family. But I believe that when we give our lives to Jesus, we enter a new kind of relationship which is different from the ones we have with parents or children. It is beyond words, yet we try to use the same word "love" to describe both things. Ultimately, all love is indescribable; we can only tell others about it if they themselves have experienced it. This is a wonderful thing, but not always helpful when trying to encourage others to give their lives to Jesus. So we fall back on our everyday words — just as Jesus did, when he was trying to explain this to the disciples. I think that when he says, "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me," he has the same problem. The words aren't enough. They don't *say* enough. We need something else to help us understand.

And you might say that much of the Bible is like this. Oh, the history books are quite clear and literal, and the Proverbs, and a few other bits. But there is much of the Gospels and of Paul's letters, for example, which can say more to us than the words alone seem to say. And that is where the Holy Spirit comes in. When we

give our lives to Christ, we receive the gift of the Spirit, and the Spirit helps us understand what God is telling us. The Spirit establishes a real connection to God, so that when we read the Bible, or when we think about the love of God, or the grace of God, we understand more than what our words alone can say. When we turn to Christ in faith, God responds to our faith by making this close connection. Faith leads to understanding, and understanding leads to deeper love. Faith, and the grace of God, make it possible for us to love Jesus more than we love anyone else.

Faith comes from God, and is a gift from God, but we need to exercise it. We need to make the choice to put it to use. It is as if God is holding out his hand to us, and in his hand is this precious gift called faith. If we take hold of it, something like a miracle happens, for we enter into the love of God in Christ, and we are given understanding we could not have otherwise.

We have so much to be thankful for in this relationship with God. Once we turn to God and commit our lives to God's service, God gives us all that we need for understanding, for faith, for the love that God so wants from us. Everything is reinforced through faith. This is how we are able to get past that rather scary last part of our Gospel passage, when Jesus says he has come to turn

‘a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—‘ (Matt 10:35)

When we understand that Jesus must come first, and when God helps us to make that happen, there is no conflict. All is solved through the love of God, which is ours for the taking. Thanks be to our most loving and gracious Lord. Amen.