

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord.

²Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. ³Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they **shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.**

⁵The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. **⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.** And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

Colossians 1:11-20

¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to **endure everything with patience, while joyfully** ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, **whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.** ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Luke 1:68-79

⁶⁸ 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness

before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.’

Testify to unfettered love

So I just performed a wedding for a young couple on Friday, some friends of our son James. Before that I had the pleasure of counseling them for a couple months. And I notice something about so many young folks who are in love; they have these smiles that are permanently etched on their faces. I mean, I could be talking to them about all the “what ifs” that could create struggles and conflicts in their marriage, and maybe the smile would fade for a few thoughtful seconds as one would look down, but it would immediately come back. And I thought “this in unfettered love.” I mean, there is nothing holding back that love they have for each other. This is what I want to speak about today: testifying to unfettered love.

Last week I spoke about testifying to righteousness, that is God’s righteousness. And that’s a concept that is often misunderstood; God’s righteousness is not about how perfect he is and how unworthy we are – that’s the understanding of righteousness that frustrates us and can actually cause us to HATE God, especially if we think that our salvation depends upon our own goodness. No, God’s righteousness must be understood as an act of love toward us. Through Christ we have all been declared righteous not by our own actions but by the cross. God displayed his love and communicated our pardon and forgiveness through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And though the world is far from a perfect place – there is plenty of violence and hatred to go around – we as Christians are called to testify to God’s righteousness. That is the Gospel, the *good news* of God’s forgiveness and our redemption.

So last week I spoke about our calling to testify to righteousness – it’s not just about my salvation but rather everyone’s salvation. And that may sound like an easy thing to do, **but not always**. In fact, it was that kind of testimony that led many Christians to martyrdom, to a Roman coliseum where they were devoured by wild animals or to stakes where they were burned or crosses where they were crucified. Why would testifying to God’s righteousness cause others to want to kill you? Because it isn’t just about personal forgiveness of sins and “going to heaven;” no one would want to kill a person for saying “I’m forgiven and I’m going to heaven when I die.” No one would want to kill you for inviting someone else to receive God’s forgiveness and being assured of salvation; people can take it or leave it. **What’s dangerous is declaring that God’s righteous rule is coming to this world. What’s dangerous is declaring that you yourself are not just “saved” but you are an instrument of God’s righteousness in the here and now. What’s dangerous is declaring that Jesus is your Lord; not the President, not the dictator, not the emperor, not you manager or supervisor or commanding officer, but Jesus who was crucified and resurrected for us. What’s dangerous is walking the walk that Jesus wants us to walk, where we may have to say something to the scribes, the priests, the Pharisees, the dictators, and the powers**

that be. What's dangerous is standing up not only for ourselves but for everyone who is persecuted or excluded. And those are the dangers that "fetter" us, that keep us from speaking or acting in ways that serve God's purposes.

But God's love should "unfetter" us. God's love loosens the chains that restrain us from loving one another the way God loves us. God's love is like the love between a bride and a groom at their wedding. I think of all the love songs that say things like, "I would climb the highest mountain, swim the deepest sea, etc, etc." We may be cynical and say that they're just saying that in order to persuade the other to love *them*, but I believe that some husbands and wives really mean what they say. And Jesus is proof that God really means what he says when he says, "I love you." Jesus suffered and died for us. What's more: He has risen and promises that we too will have life eternal. Jesus' unfettered love for us invites us to have an unfettered love for him, unfettered by any prospect of suffering or death. Jesus invites us to lose our old life where we were fettered by fear and sin and death and to join him in new life where we are free for joyful obedience. Jesus said, "Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it" (Luke 17:33).

But let's face it: few people in history have been able to love God in such an unfettered manner that they no longer fear suffering death. Few people in history have been willing to climb the highest mountain and swim the deepest sea for Jesus. And it's important that we acknowledge those limits first and foremost. Because some folks, instead of acknowledging those limits, would try to persuade themselves that God doesn't ask us to climb every mountain and swim the deepest sea, that all we need to do is sing about how wonderful God is and attend church. Some folks would say that testifying to God's righteousness just involves thanking Jesus for making us right with God through his death on the cross. That theology completely ignores that courage that led Jesus to the cross and countless others to their deaths as they worked to declare God's reign on earth as it is in heaven.

And ultimately those people trivialize God's love. Because if we convince ourselves that God expects anything less than everything from us we end up expecting less than everything from God. There's a great movie, made in 1937, starring Cary Grant and Irene Dunne, and I won't spoil the plot for you, because you really should watch it. Part of the plot involves a husband who cheats on his wife, and then quite naturally suspects that she has been cheating on him. I say "naturally" because when you offer imperfect love to someone else, you expect imperfect love in return. Those who diminish God's expectation of them to a mere confession of faith end up living in fear and doubt about their own salvation because they are not sure how much they can truly expect from God. Imagine a husband and wife who agree that it's okay for each of them to sleep around. How deep do you think their love really goes? It's better for us to confess our unfaithfulness to God than it is to convince ourselves that we're doing enough.

Because another result of thinking God's love is anything less than perfect us toward means that our love for others becomes less-than-perfect as well. The human mind has a peculiar way of justifying our own bad behavior for others by demonizing the other person – that means seeing another person as a liar or a deceiver or someone "undeserving" of our love. A person asks you for spare change and our mind assumes that he's got a drug problem and whatever we give him is going to be used to buy heroin, and so our lack of charity becomes a virtue; we're now saving this poor person from his drug dependency. Or we feel uncomfortable with people who don't look like us, and so we rationalize that it's okay to take actions that make it harder for people who don't look like us from immigrating to this country. Imagine if God treated us the way we treat others. Are any of us deserving of God's love and

care? Does God discriminate according to race or gender or religion? If you believe that, you can't help but have doubts about just how warm and welcoming God is to you.

Unfettered love is perfect love that desires nothing more than to love and be loved perfectly. And perfect love is demanding love that withholds nothing from God or from one another, just as it expects God to withhold nothing from us. Let us confess to the limits we place on our love toward God and toward others, and pray that those things that "fetter" our love would be removed. Let us strive always to give ourselves more and more to God and to one another. Amen.