

Staying in Love with God – Our Whole Lives Long  
1 John 1:5 – 2:2 and John 1:29  
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First UMC Baraboo  
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Two women were talking next to me yesterday morning in the Blueberry patch where I was picking. They hadn't seen each other in awhile, and were recounting stories of what their adult children were doing now; what the friends of their adult sons and daughters were doing: who was working where, who had gotten married and had babies, what kind of professions each had moved into. It was quite for a moment. "Where does the time go?" They wondered and shook their heads. These little children are now all grown up! How could it happen?" Have you heard this advice for new grandparents: watch out! Just blink and all of a sudden your grand kids will be grown up. "Where does the time go? How do kids get to be grown ups so fast? "

Here's another mystery to ponder: "how is it that we get grown up in faith? How is it that we move from loving God a certain way – in Sunday school, maybe in Confirmation – and keep on growing up in faith? How do we mature in faith? What's the secret ingredient? In solving this mystery, the question is not "how can things change so fast?" The question is: "how do you stay close for a long time, a life time even, with the one who loved us before we were born? The one who wants to love us through this live into the next?" Is it even possible?

Staying in love with God in the Wesleyan tradition is living out 1 John 4:12 "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." The word "perfect" really means "complete." When our love is complete, all we do will be motivated by love. We express love for each other in concrete ways. God's love is seen through us more and more. Today I hope to convince you it is possible to stay in love with God our whole lives long. But it may be something different than you think. Reaching maturity – staying in love with God our whole lives long -- is not a matter of attaining a state of spiritual perfection. It's not about getting something – it's about learning to share. So, how exactly does that happen?

"The elder" – the anonymous author of the first letter of John -- gives us some insights. Before I explain how this works, let me tell you about Bridget.

Bridget was a 12 year old girl in a church I served once. She was the daughter of Lance and Jackie. Lance was an engineer for Harley Davidson. Jackie was a financial whiz who served as the church's financial secretary. To celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, Lance, Jackie and Bridget were all going together to England. Lance wanted to make the trip special. Without telling Jackie, Lance contacted the

pastor at a Methodist church in the small English town where they would be visiting, to have a private, renewal of vows ceremony in that historic church. I learned afterwards the trip was a great success. Jackie was pleased with the surprise Lance had planned. The three of them had a great time in England. A few months after their return, the church learned that Jackie and Lance were expecting another child.

This was not exactly something they planned but everyone in the church was thrilled for them. But not Bridget. She was not happy about this news. She had been the apple of Mom and Dad's eye her whole life. Now that was going to change. Sharing her mom and dad's attention with someone else was not a happy thought. For months, was a black cloud over Bridget. She radiated anger, hurt and resentment. But then the baby was born. Lance and Jackie named her "Kelly." Suddenly Bridget had a change of heart. She had a whole new attitude. She was now proud of her baby sister and doted on her. The sisters became inseparable. All that resentful Bridget felt was gone.

In becoming a big sister Bridget learned a life lesson in sharing. To share means to divide or use something with others. Bridget learned she could share her parents' love; she could divide what she had and there was plenty to go around. Bridget even found joy in sharing time with her baby sister. Bridget matured through all this. She became a happier person. Bridget was on her way to staying in love with God.

I tell you this story about Bridget as a kind of parable, about our own relationship with God. Sharing is crucial when it comes to our lives of faith. Lack of sharing – refusal or unwillingness to share – can be evidence of sin working in our lives.

Listen again to 1 John 2:1-12: "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." Last week I talked about how the exiles in Babylon learned that Yahweh was the God of the Babylonians too. When God is in the picture, there is only us; not us and them. Jeremiah and Jesus tells us we are to pray for our enemies, seek their welfare, because God is their god too. For Jesus love that had reached completion was love that knew no bounds; love for both friends and enemies. Staying in love with God first means sharing God's love with the whole world means knowing Jesus' death was for the sins of the whole world (not just yours and mine).

Listen again to 1 John 2:1-2: "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." Let's go back for a minute to Jackie and Lance's love for Bridget. God our parent loves us as any good mother, good father loves her or his child. To have fellowship with God the Father revealed in

Jesus Christ – to have intimacy/closeness with God – is the most wonderful feeling we can have – the joy, the hope, the peace, the beauty that fills our souls is unlike anything the world has to offer. I want that for you. I want that for me. I want that for everyone. And yet if we stop there – if we are content with our personal relationship with God, being assured of our closeness/intimacy confident that when we die we'll go and be with God eternally – if that's where faith stops, then we've not grown up yet. Faith means sharing.

Sharing is important in our lives of faith. Sharing is what God does. It says in John 3:16 God so loved the world that he gave – God shared – his only son with the world, so that we might not perish but have eternal life. This saving of the world happened as Jesus shared himself, his life with us. 1 John 2:2 says he was the atoning sacrifice for our sins. He shared himself, so that the obstacles to our own full relationship with God could be removed. Jesus shared his life with us in such a full and complete way that we – all of humanity – was forever changed. Staying in love with God means sharing God's love with the whole world. It means sharing it with people we know. And it means sharing in the life of Christ.

Staying in love means sharing in the life of Jesus, the one in whom we find forgiveness of sin. To know Jesus means we must confront the reality of our sin. Sin is real. Sin is pervasive and as common as a 12 year old girl being jealous of her yet-to-be-born sibling who will compete for Mom and Dad's love. It may seem a stretch to talk about Bridget's jealousy as sin. You may say "that's natural human development." And maybe it is. But a refusal to grow up and mature – for her to stay jealous, angry and resentful can lead to harmful actions if left to fester too long. After all, wasn't one of the first examples of sin in the Bible what one sibling was capable of doing to another, when he became jealous when his brother's offering was accepted by God and his was not? To talk about sin as actions that brothers and sisters are capable of doing to each other is just to remind us how closely sin clings to us – but we can master it. Sin is as hard for us to see in our lives as it was hard for Bridget to see that her parents love for her wouldn't diminish with the arrival of a sibling. It's so much easier to see other people's sins than it is to see our own.

If you think you aren't capable of sinning, think again. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." When 1 John was written, there were some folks in the Johannine community who thought that since God is light and in him there is no darkness, then all you needed to do was just believe in this God and you are free from sin. These misguided members of the community could not see their sin but others could. The same is true for us.

Sin is real. But The point "the elder" is making is: don't wallow in your sin. Find release/forgiveness. That means letting the advocate help us. We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous." 1 John 2:1. Here the elder is using a legal word– advocate in the sense of a lawyer, like a public defender – to remind us

that when we are called to account for our messing up. , we have someone to defend us/protect us/save us. That's Jesus. Christ's death on the cross has lifted from us the burden of feeling wrong/bad/ashamed/unworthy. By God's grace, we can find that this burden is lifted when we come to faith in Christ. Through faith, we are released from those burdens that can seem too much to bear. That's the focus for the elder: not our sinfulness the hope we have through faith in Christ that we can change, just like Bridget changed.

How do we really grow up in faith? How do we continue to become "Bridgets" – people who move from sin to salvation, from greed to sharing? From having to share to getting to share? From people who know the love of God to people who can't help but share that love with others? That question will be answered as you walk your path, following your own unique journey into the heart of God and out into the world where there is beauty and suffering, heart ache and joy. As you follow your own spiral path. First we move inward as we find and touch on and share in the life of Christ, who gave himself for us. Growing up means never getting too far from our need for him. Being grown up in faith is not doing life on your own. It's trusting in God's in Christ more and more. Staying in love with God is also an outward journey. It is sharing God's love with others – through concrete acts of caring. In the end it may remain a mystery, how this little parable of a 12 year old girl becomes our story. But we celebrate and cheer wildly when we see that story lived out in the world. I leave you with one version of that story which was in the news this week.

The whole world watched as an almost three week ordeal unfolded with the rescue of the Wild Boar soccer team from the Tham Luang Cave in Thailand. The team along with their 25 year old monk turned soccer coach were discovered alive on July 2 by a pair of divers from Britain. Then began the complex, difficult, near impossible task of bringing these emaciated boys – none of whom could swim – out of one of the most challenging caves in the world. It took a team of 10,000 people including 2,000 soldiers, 200 divers and representatives of 100 government agencies. The level of risk was brought home when Saman Gunan, a retired Thai Navy Seal now working as an airport security guard, joined the operation and died in and underwater passageway when his oxygen tank got depleted. How to explain the success of this rescue? "The whole world was watching, so we had to succeed" said one Thai soldier involved in the rescue. I don't think we had any other choice" he said. Major Charles Hodges, the U.S. military official in charge of our country's team to free the boy had chalked it up to bravery. "I don't know of any other rescue that put the rescuer and the rescuee in so much danger over a prolonged period of time, unless it is something along the lines of firefighters going into the World Trade Center knowing that the building is on fire and is going to collapse," What Major Hodges called bravery I'd call maturity. Growing up. Think of all the people who shared of themselves – their time – and in one case his life -- so that these boys could be freed? Their lives, their parent's lives, will never be the same. In a way we shouldn't be surprised! Isn't this what God in Christ has done for us – shared his life with us so that

our lives will never be the same? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, here's the good news: we can stay in love with God our whole lives long. We can grow up. We can mature. In our journey we can find joy and we can share it with others. Thanks be to God...