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First UMC
Springboro, Ohio

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Worship Series: “Hands Free, Hearts Open, God First”

Message: “Seeing the Good”

Scripture: Luke 6:37-42, I Corinthians 13:1-13

 Happy Valentine’s Day. I was focused on the beginning of Lent and nearly forgot about Valentine’s Day until Wednesday when I ran into Krogers to get a few things for the Ash Wednesday service and was overwhelmed with a sea of red and white flowers, balloons, and hearts. To get to the broccoli, I had to walk through Cupid’s workshop.

 Although it causes some angst when it falls during Lent, especially if you’ve given up chocolate, Valentine’s Day does add a nice bit of beauty, color, and fun to a cold and dreary time of year. It’s a nice opportunity to think of others, whether they are your sweetheart or just a friend.

 We make Valentine’s Day about a sweet, sappy sort of romantic love. Eros is the term for it in Greek. And sometimes it is about philia, the love between friends. But as we think about it in the church, as we think about the fact that this is St. Valentine’s Day, we realize that there must be more to this day. Why would the church make this guy a saint and give him his own feast day?

 St. Valentine is a bit of a mystery when it comes to historical facts. We know he was a priest in Rome who was martyred and made a saint. The details about why are more vague. Most sources include the fact that he was imprisoned and killed for his faith and for helping other Christians who were in prison. There are various versions of his healing a young lady who was blind. And then finally, it is said that during a time of war the Emperor could not get enough young men to go to battle so he banned all engagements and marriages so the men would be free to go and fight. But St. Valentine did weddings anyway, lifting up love, family, and peace over hate, war, and empire.

 With his witness, St. Valentine reminds us not just of eros or philia love, but also of another kind of love which we call agape love. It is the love that goes beyond just a little crush, beyond giddy moments and fairytale weddings, it goes beyond the love of friends and family. It is a love that is deep, powerful, in the trenches, there in the darkest days and hours when everything seems to be falling apart. It is a love that is tough, relentless, and transformational. It has the power to change us, to change the world, even to change eternity. It is the love of God that fills us and claims us when we come to faith in Jesus Christ.

 David Ewart describes the difference between agape and the other kinds of love like this: “Agape is not romantic love, liking, or even friendship. It is whole hearted, unreserved, unconditional desire for the wellbeing of the other…expecting nothing in return.”

 When we say “I love you” what do we mean? Is this truly what we mean? Think about those we love. Yes, we desire their wellbeing. We love them when they are not perfect…mostly. But we get frustrated and disappointed and our feelings hurt. To love them expecting nothing in return....That’s a pretty high standard. What about a thank you? What about a nod of appreciation? Those are good things. But this kind of love says I desire your wellbeing, I love you, even when you have hurt me or those I love. I will desire the best for you anyway. I will advocate for your good anyway. I will love you even when I don’t like you. I will love you when fear and frustration rise up within me and threaten to take over. I will love in this way because this is who God is and how God loves and it is God’s love dwelling in and working through me.

 This is the kind of love that Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 13. It is often used to describe romantic love, read at weddings and perhaps read on Valentine’s Day. But what Paul is talking about here is how God loves and how God calls us to love each other individually and in community. It’s a call to a radically different way of living. It’s a call to live lives out of an alternate vision of reality, to reverse the values of this culture, to live in a new kind of life in this world: patient, kind, forgiving, bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things, never ending, never failing.

 Our current series is Hand Free, Hearts Open, God First which lays out a vision for how we want to live as Christians in this world today. If we’re going to live in this way, we will have to see differently. We will have to see life and others through the lens of this agape love that we have been talking about. When we can do this, it changes how we see everything.

 We realize that we are all connected in God. In God’s love we are all a human family. When we see each other in harsh judgment and criticism, when we see each other though our ego, territorialism, and worldview, and when others treat us the same, it hurts not just the others, but also us.

 This is what Jesus is teaching about in our passage in Luke. He says, when we see others with the eyes of criticism, of anger, of harshness, we are creating that same sort of standard to be judged with. The measure we use to judge others will be the measure used to judge us.

 Too often, the reason our hands are full in life is because they are full of judgment. We’re so busy judging ourselves and others, comparing, analyzing, taking surveys, figuring out what others think of us and we of them and overreacting in judgment that our hands are full. And this kind of thinking closes our hearts to each other, and to the blessings of experiencing the good in community. Instead, we’re continually in competition.

 This is the problem that motivates Paul to write I Corinthians 13. Those in the community are all arguing about who is better, who has the better gifts, and putting down the gifts of others.

 Paul calls them out on this. You might have the best gift, he says, but it doesn’t matter if you do and you use it perfectly. You can be the most popular and the most beautiful and the most charming, but if you don’t live in and share this kind of agape love, if you don’t see the others here through the eyes of selfless unconditional love, desiring their wellbeing as much as your own, then it’s just a waste of time and talent. It’s an illusion…a lot of hot air. You can be absolutely 100% right about something, but if you don’t share it in love and treat the other with love and respect, it really doesn’t matter.

 We are only as strong as our weakest link. How we treat them, what we desire for them, is how we treat ourselves and what we desire for ourselves.

 So how can we begin to see each other with the measure of love that Paul talks about, so that we can also see ourselves and others in this way too? We have to work to see through the eyes of love…to see the good in others.

 In those moments when we so want to label and demonize, we stop and step back and let God’s love help us see the good, to see this person’s gifts and to want the best for them like God does. Often it means flipping the coin over and seeing the other side—deciding to see strong and determined rather than bull headed, seeing creative rather than messy, seeing free spirited and fun rather than irresponsible, a leader rather than bossy, prophetic rather than someone who is challenging my opinions, caring and sensitive rather than nosey.

 It’s not easy. But this kind of love isn’t easy. It’s the kind of love that goes all the way to the cross and beyond. Who do you get frustrated at? Angry at? Hurt by? And then tend to judge more harshly back? How can you begin to see them differently? How can you see the good in them?

 When we can begin to see like God, to love with God’s agape love, when our hands are free of judgment, then our hearts are truly open to others and we find that we do truly desire the best for them.

 Often when we hear this passage about judgment and the log in our own eye, we hear take the log out of your own eye and don’t worry about the sawdust in your neighbor’s eye. But when you take care of the long in your own eye, once it heals, you realize how much better you feel. Your eye doesn’t hurt anymore. You can see so much more clearly now.

 And instead of judging them for the sawdust in their eye, as you have gotten rid of the log of judgment in your own eye, you begin to think about how much their eye must hurt, how uncomfortable it is. And your desire becomes not to judge them, but to help them feel better.

 And when this becomes our way of seeing, of caring for others with God’s unconditional, unreserved desire for the wellbeing of the other, then God and God’s love becomes first in our lives. We might even become like St. Valentine, taking great risks for the sake of God’s love, denying ourselves, being persecuted, and even killed, or maybe at least, keeping our mouth shut when we want to say hurtful things, being courageous to speak the truth in a kind and loving way, setting aside our hurts and expectations, and living with concern for our family members and friends, and maybe even our rivals and enemies, all for the sake of this love, this amazing, tough, resilient, everlasting love, God’s agape love.