

“The Love of God”
Genesis 17:1-16
The Confession of 1967 9.17
Sermon #91
Lent 2
51st Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic
2.28.21

Genesis 17:1-16 CEB

1 When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am El Shaddai. Walk with me and be trustworthy. **2** I will make a covenant between us and I will give you many, many descendants.” **3** Abram fell on his face, and God said to him, **4** “But me, my covenant is with you; you will be the ancestor of many nations. **5** And because I have made you the ancestor of many nations, your name will no longer be Abram but Abraham. **6** I will make you very fertile. I will produce nations from you, and kings will come from you. **7** I will set up my covenant with you and your descendants after you in every generation as an enduring covenant. I will be your God and your descendants’ God after you.

8 I will give you and your descendants the land in which you are immigrants, the whole land of Canaan, as an enduring possession. And I will be their God.”

9 God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants in every generation. **10** This is my covenant that you and your descendants must keep: Circumcise every male. **11** You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it will be a symbol of the covenant between us. **12** On the eighth day after birth, every male in every generation must be circumcised, including those who are not your own children: those born in your household and those purchased with silver from foreigners. **13** Be sure you circumcise those born in your household and those purchased with your silver. Your flesh will embody my covenant as an enduring covenant. **14** Any uncircumcised male

whose flesh of his foreskin remains uncircumcised will be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant.”

15 God said to Abraham, “As for your wife Sarai, you will no longer call her Sarai. Her name will now be Sarah. **16** I will bless her and even give you a son from her. I will bless her so that she will become nations, and kings of peoples will come from her.”

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God.**

The Confession of 1967 9.17

God has created man in a personal relation with himself that man may respond to the love of the Creator. He has created male and female and given them a life which proceeds from birth to death in a succession of generations and in a wide complex of social relations. He has endowed man with capacities to make the world

serve his needs and to enjoy its good things. Life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage. Man is free to seek his life within the purpose of God: to develop and protect the resources of nature for the common welfare, to work for justice and peace in society, and in other ways to use his creative powers for the fulfillment of human life.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We tend to get so bogged down in the minutia, we lose the bigger picture that is worth pointing out: God desires a relationship with us.

Maybe this sounds trite. Maybe it sounds ridiculous. Maybe it sounds fake. Certainly, we've seen those signs that say "God hates *XYZ*", "Prepare to meet thy God" which is usually followed by "Are you going to heaven or hell?". There are plenty of others and you know what I'm talking about. You don't have to go far to see the billboards that populate this part of the country. Sure, there are road signs that point to a more hopeful message, but it's usually fire and brimstone.

But, a relationship with God, or rather, God WANTING a relationship with us. It's in our DNA as people of the Reformed branch of Christianity. What's that first question for those who memorized the Westminster Catechism?

What is the chief end of man?

Man's chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever.¹

Enjoy God forever? It sounds like if our purpose is to glorify AND enjoy God forever as told to us in the scriptures, then maybe God's plan for us this whole time is to have a relationship with him.

Of course, not only in our Reformed DNA, but in the DNA of Christianity, do we find that God wants a relationship with us. For example, why would God want to create humanity all the way back in the Garden of Eden? Why would God make clothes for our first parents and then bother to keep up with Adam and Eve after they were expelled from the Garden? Why would God bother to call an old, childless couple from Ur who didn't always mind the

¹ The Shorter Catechism 7.001

boundaries God had set up for them? Why would God continue to renew covenants with this couple, Abraham and Sarah, after years of waiting? Because God desires a relationship with each and everyone of us.

Today's scripture is, for many, a familiar story. God reveals himself to be *El Shaddai*, God Almighty, to this 99-year-old man and asks him to walk with him.

That's a personal encounter with the Almighty.

But, this relationship is not without boundaries that God must create in order to protect us because God loves us so much! After promising that many people and nations will come from Abraham

and Sarah and the land of Canaan, God sets up some ground rules about circumcision. This is to set apart Abraham and Sarah's people from everyone else. Also, this is to continue the *walk* with God Almighty.

God desires to continue this personal relationship after Abraham and Sarah are dead! And that relationship continues with us and so many others in every time and place.

But, let's not forget that God wants us to be in relationship with each other.

Our relationships are complex. Some are healthy. Some are dysfunctional. Some are new while others old. Like Adam and Eve

in the Garden, we were created for relationships. Relationships of all kinds: Partners, friends, colleagues, mentor-mentee, and others.

There was a young man named François Clemmons.² Born in the rural South in the mid-1940s, his family moved to Ohio. In his life from childhood through adolescence, Clemmons faced racism and homophobia. He's Black. He's Gay.

As a young adult studying music in the late 1960s and singing at Third Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, PA, he encountered a person who would eventually form a deep friendship with him. But, this relationship would not be so simple. In fact, this relationship

²<https://www.npr.org/2020/04/30/847315345/officer-clemmons-mister-rogers-neighborhood-policeman-pal-tells-his-story>

had some honest complications, as Dr. Clemmons has spelled out in his book, *Officer Clemmons: A Memoir*.

One day, François Clemmons was approached by a sincere, blue-eyed, 40ish year-old Presbyterian minister. This minister was affirming Clemmons' voice and noted how his interpretation of the music had been positively affecting him. This minister was Fred Rogers and he asked the younger Clemmons to be on *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* as Officer Clemmons.

Now, as a Black man, portraying an officer is complicated.

Clemmons recognizes that there is mistrust between law enforcement and people of color, especially Blacks. But, in the tumultuous times of the late 1960s, Mr. Rogers recognized that the

soon-to-be Officer Clemmons would be needed to help minister to the world.

Unfortunately, the 1960s was also a time when people who identified as anything other than heterosexual must remain in the closet. Fred Rogers, while personally accepting, said that this would destroy Clemmons' career as well as the TV show.

This relationship was complex. This relationship was not perfect. This relationship, though, spanned decades after that day on *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* when Officer Clemmons and Fred Rogers put their feet in the same kiddie pool. A Black man sharing the pool with Mr. Rogers in 1968. Officer Clemmons would return to the

show numerous times. At the end of the show's run, they would reenact that moment at the pool.

As we've seen with Abraham and Sarah, not only is this relationship with God important, relationships with each other, in the here and now, are important, too. Nations and kings will come from this couple and they are to mind the boundaries God has set up with them as well as the boundaries that promote a healthy life with humanity. God desires to be in relationship with us and God desires for us to be in relationship with each other.

C67 puts it this way as well:

God has created man in a personal relation with himself that man may respond to the love of the Creator. He has created male and

female and given them a life which proceeds from birth to death in a succession of generations and in a wide complex of social relations.

No relationship is perfect. Far from it! Unfortunately, many of us have relationships that are strained or broken, too. It's not God's will to have broken relationships, but they do happen. It is a theme all too common. Sometimes we have to set ourselves apart from someone else who is toxic. It's a necessary boundary. But, we can still love from afar and pray or work for the best for them while taking care of ourselves.

But, even in the healthiest of situations, relationships are hard.

They take work. It's true in our relationship with God. It's true in

our relationship with each other. It's true in our relationship with ourselves.

I think about this complicated relationship between Clemmons and Rogers. I think about those who are listening to this sermon right now. I think about those dreaded road signs. God loves us so much. If God didn't, then why would God bother checking up, for example, on Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, and the exiled people of Israel to proclaim a word of hope to them? Why would a complicated, but necessary relationship between François Clemmons and Fred Rogers be used at a moment of crisis in our nation and world in the midst of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement? Because God loves us and wants all of us to be in relationship with God and each other.

That, siblings in Christ, is Good News.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.