

United Methodist Church of Monroe  
Monroe, CT  
February 26, 2017  
10:00 a.m. Service

**"The Greatest Love of All"**

Text: Matthew 17:1-9

*I decided long ago, never to walk in anyone's shadows  
If I fail, if I succeed  
At least I'll live as I believe  
No matter what they take from me  
They can't take away my dignity  
Because the greatest love of all  
Is happening to me  
I found the greatest love of all  
Inside of me  
The greatest love of all  
Is easy to achieve  
Learning to love yourself*

These words written by George Benson, and sung by Whitney Houston remind us again of that beautiful commandment, that in order to love one another we must first love ourselves. Yet, what we need to remember, maybe different than what Benson intended, is that the source of that love does not come from ourselves. Such deep deep love, true unconditional love can never originate with us. It is only through the transformation that occurs within us when we allow God's sweeping love to overtake us that the greatest love of all will shine through.

Unfortunately I can't tell you who said this, because although I wrote it down while doing my research I forgot to put who said it, but I liked it so I am going to share it with you, and hopefully will come across the author later... "*When we love one another, we re-present God to the world.*" Re-present God. So many people either don't have a relationship with God or think that they are fine in their own spiritual journey.

Skye Jethani, in an article in *Christianity Today* talks about the "unchurched" and the "de-churched." I think we are all familiar with the "unchurched," those who have had no experience with church or Christ and there are many programs and books and long talks at meetings dedicated to reaching out to them.

But the "de-churched" are those who grew up in the church and have walked away. For some they leave because of the things we have talked about in past weeks, feeling like although they have steadfastly prayed God has not answered their prayers and they have either experienced a divorce or abuse or haven't seen any of the "promises" that good, well-intentioned preachers

have spouted. But Jethani also points to another group within the de-churched population. These are Christians who have simply lost confidence in the institutional structures and programmatic accoutrements of the church. For them, as he says “the institutional church is not an aid in their faith and mission. Rather it’s become a drain on time, resources, and energy. It feels like a black hole with a gravitation pull so strong that not even the light of the gospel can escape its organizational appetite.” These are people who crave authenticity and real relationships but see a lack of depth or commitment in the “church.” Many of these folks are younger and have deep theological questions and they long for relationships but just do not find it in religious organizations. These are the folks I think we need to seek to “re-present” God to in an authentic way, but we can only do that when we have found that greatest love of all within ourselves.

I’m sure you can probably think of some people who you would like to invite to church but think, “yeah, but they will think...or they won’t like...” (fill in the blank): we are old-fashioned because of singing songs from the 1700s, there is no one here that looks like them...These “de-churched” folks are dedicated to social justice and making reforms, they are dedicated to the very people that Jesus has called us to be in ministry with. But they are frustrated because they see us saying we have the greatest love of all but we are not actually living out that call. And, if we don’t have it, truly have it inside of us, we can’t show it.

Today we have the opportunity to truly experience that transformative power. On that mountaintop Jesus’ appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. *The Message* version says: “*Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were filled with light.*” And then, Beloved Peter breaks in and says “*Master, this is a great moment! What would you think if I built three memorials here on the mountain—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah?*” I love how Eugene Peterson continues, he says: “*While he was going on like this, babbling, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and sounding from deep in the cloud a voice: ‘This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.’*” While Peter was babbling. While we are babbling, while I am babbling, God is here. God is enveloping us right now, saying, stop babbling, stop worrying, stop naysaying, “Don’t be afraid.”

We do not have to fear the future. We might have to do some changing and adapting to really feel that deep love and to really connect with the “de-churched” but in the end I am convinced it is worth it. I am convinced that if we can all find a way to come together we can truly transform this world.

Most people leave the church not because they have deep theological disagreements with something like the virgin birth or the resurrection of Christ. They leave because of disagreements they’ve had with people. As one man put it, "People in the church were more invested in the process of being right than in the process of being honest."

By allowing the love that God has shined on us to overflow into our neighbors we can re-present God in the world and we can make a change. With Lent starting, this is the perfect time to allow that transformational love to come into your life and then to share it with others.

I'm very excited about the Lenten book study we are doing of which I will be basing my sermons. If you have doubts, if you are feeling pain, if you want that love but don't know how to grasp it you may be in the Dark Wood. And God has gifts for us in those places. I used to think that when I was in a dark place it was about getting out as soon as possible, you know, about getting to the "Joy that comes in the morning." However, through this study we are going to learn that it is not about trying to get out as quickly as possible but rather about finding the gifts that are in those dark times. Finding God in those moments of emptiness, temptation, isolation.

We may be having financial difficulties here in Monroe but I believe that God is not done with us and that God has some very exciting things to reveal to us during this Lenten period if we just open ourselves up and allow God to work. And I cannot wait for Easter morning when we come together and say "I have found the Greatest Love of All."

Amen.