

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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For the Love of God

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Let us pray . . .

My brother Joe and I have recently developed a coping strategy of sorts — for all the family stuff we’re walking through — which we deploy as needed via texting. It’s called “For the love of God”

And it goes something like this:

Joe to me: For the love of God, it was 87 degrees in mom’s house, why won’t she use the air conditioner?

Me to Joe: For the love of God, don’t lose mom’s password, it’s the 900th time I’ve changed it.

Joe to me: For the love go God, mom's telling the attorney her life story and we're paying \$195 an hour.

You get the picture.

In our lesson this morning, another Joe — Joseph — doesn't so much call on the love of God, but is guided and blessed by God's love — despite being tricked by his brothers and sold into Egyptian slavery.

In last week's recap: While Jacob had many children through Leah and her and Rachel's slaves, Rachel was barren, but in the end, received God's blessing when she conceived and gave birth to Joseph.

It seems Joseph's birth was the catalyst for Jacob's readiness to return to Canaan and face his brother Esau. The night before the long anticipated confrontation, Jacob wrestles with God — or something of God — and receives God's blessing with a new name, Israel. The next morning, as Jacob — now Israel — limps toward the inevitable, I can't help but wonder if he thought, "For the love of God, let me survive Esau and his 400 men."

Chapter 33:4 tells us that *Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.*

The story soon begins to turn and focus on Joseph, who has a gift for interpreting dreams, and is the apple of his father's eye. In fact, as I prepared the lesson for today, two verses caught my attention.

Verse 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children
And in verse 15 What are you looking for?

With all the things I've told you across the years, I'm not sure I've ever told you the 2 reasons why I have faith in and "for the love of God."

The first reason feels easy: It's because of the non-stop miraculous awe and wonder in the natural world, from the infinite variety of life which is held in an observable and reliable rhythm and cycle — to the mysteries of birth and death. It's why I star gaze. Or send you pictures of baby critters and patterns in nature. These things are part of the revelation of the love of God.

God is another way of saying "love." And if there's one thing I have an abundance of in my life, it is love — certainly more love than I ever deserved. In fact if I were a saturated sea sponge and the water were love, and if you could wring me out — swoosh — that's how much love I've received. So like Jacob and Joseph, I know my life is deeply blessed by God. Interestingly enough though, all my blessings are not why I'm a pastor.

The second reason, and the reason I live for the love of God — why I share the Gospel, the good news — is because of suffering.

Now because the world is full of so much suffering, people ask
“Where is God?”

It’s a reasonable question and I’ve wondered that myself at times.

And the way some people seem to mostly move easily through life and others can’t get a break, you have to wonder if God does not in fact love some more than others.

Personally, I have known very little suffering in my life. In fact, some of my worse suffering has come from decisions of which I took part. But at the end of the day — I am blessed for sure.

But I have seen and will continue to see and walk with the suffering of others. Suffering where people may or may not rely on the love of God — suffering that seems to be all someone knows in this life. Suffering physically, emotionally, spiritually, experientially, materially, socially, economically. It goes on and on.

And if it goes on too long, then people lose hope.

So that brings me back to verse 15 *What are you looking for?*

Beloveds, I'm looking for you to believe the good news that all the stories of the love of God point to the message of hope — a hope that resides in a realm that is bigger and beyond what we can possibly imagine or fathom or preach.

A hope that has the last word.

Part of being a Christian is the belief or hope in something more that continues after we leave this life. It gets named heaven in the Bible, but that almost doesn't feel like a big enough word. I've told you about my brief visit to the continuation. Words are deeply inadequate to talk about what keeps going. But in this realm, words are all we have to frame hope.

So, the old or first testament tells us of this hope through its ancient stories such as we've talked about lately — Sarah can't conceive, Isaac will be sacrificed, Esau wants to kill Jacob, Jacob is stuck away from the promised land, Joseph is sold into slavery — and yet as the podcasters at

Pulpit Fiction remind us, God is working within all things and lovingly calling and moving creation to a time of justice and peace.

Sometimes we participate in that justice and peace while here.

And the new or second testament reminds us that all suffering will come to an end. For the love of God so loved the world, that there was the nearness of God and a resurrection. And in that story is invitation and curiosity and movement toward a hope that says in and through the story of Christ is the revelation of God's love, and this life is not the only life, is not all there is. Only God holds and knows its fullness and completeness, and in and for the love of God we will eventually be released from this earthly realm and somehow moved closer to God.

Where there is no more suffering.

Where the good news means that in your existence and in your being here, your suffering will not be all that you ever knew.

Suffering will not be your presiding memory.

It simply will no longer exist.

So, if you are suffering, have hope for what will be, but also have faith in and for the love of God.

I'm not saying suck it up and bear your suffering. For the love of God, pray. Talk to God. Ask for help. Reach out.

Count the blessings you do have.

And remember the bigger picture.

And if you are in a position to help ease another's suffering — and let's be real — we can always do something to ease the suffering of another, then do so.

But just remember, if God loves anybody with particular favoritism, it is you.

And what the love of God wants is for us to believe it.