

“THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO DOGS (#4):
FAITHFUL AND TRUE, HAPPY TO SEE YOU”

(Zephaniah 3:17; Luke 15:1-10)
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[East Cobb U.M.C.; 7-29-07]

--I--

1. Read Text: Zephaniah 3:17; Luke 15:1-10 and Pray.
2. For the past three weeks, we've been sharing in light-hearted yet genuine sermon series called The Gospel According to Dogs, inspired by a book by Robert Short of the same title.

A--And while on the surface such a series might have seemed a bit irreligious, my hope is that over the course of these messages we've been able to demonstrate how our canine friends can truly teach and remind us of some fundamental Biblical principles about the living of Christian faith and daily our relationship with God.

B--For example, we learned how dogs can teach us lessons about such Biblical practices as humility, obedience, surrender, singleness of devotion towards God, and even learn how to be more “real” with both God and others. *(And by the way, if you missed any of these I encourage you to go to our church's website & you can download these transcripts for yourself).*

3. But today as we conclude this series, I want to shift perspective a bit.

A--To this point in these messages, we've essentially been comparing dogs to *Christians* – reflecting on what dogs can teach us about OUR Christian faith and living.

B--But today I *don't* want to compare dogs to *Christians*, but instead to compare dogs to *God himself* – that is: to use our canine friends to talk about and reflect upon at least one quality of GOD'S essential nature.

1--Now again, there are probably some of you troubled by my comparison of *Almighty God* with a common *dog* – as if it's somehow irreverent or sacrilegious to do this.

2--But I can't help but wonder if one of the reasons God created dogs in the first place was precisely to reveal to human beings something of His very nature – after all, think about it: ...what is the word “**GOD**” spelled backwards? ...(**“DOG”**).

-II-

4. So, to understand the connection here, let me first tell you about a newspaper cartoon that appears in Robert Short's book.

A--[TELL STORY OF *PICKLES* CARTOON...]

It's a cartoon in the series *Pickles*, in which the grandfather is out one day walking his dog Roscoe along with his grandson Nelson. And the grandfather says, “*Yes Nelson, a dog is the purest form of unconditional love a [person] can know on this earth.... Take Roscoe here: I don't think anyone loves me more than this ole' dog.*”

Nelson (the grandson) is surprised by this and asks, “*Not even grandma?*” ...to which the grandfather replies, “*When was the last time you saw HER jump up and down and wag her tail just because I came into the room?*” ¹

B–Well, any of you that have a dog know *exactly* what this grandfather is talking about!

1–Just several weeks ago, my family and I came back from lengthy vacation to New England. And while we were gone, our dog Buzz Lightyear stayed at my in-law’s house in Tennessee (trust me, he had his *own* vacation where *he* got spoiled, too!)

2–But when we got back from our trip, my wife Trish went and picked him up and brought him home while I was back at work one day.

3–And late that afternoon, as I walked in the door, seeing Buzz (and he seeing me) for the first time in several weeks, he just went crazy! He jumped up and down and all over me, wagging his body and his tail, and just went wild!

C–Now, any of you who’ve had a dog probably know that what I’m describing – and what this grandfather described – is *fundamental* to a dog’s very nature: ...that when they’re happy to see you, this is what they do – they go crazy for joy!

(*And hence the title of today’s message: “Faithful and True, Happy to See You”*)

5. Now, in one sense we could argue that this is a metaphor for the kind of response that God wants us as *Christians* to have for *Him* – to be so madly in love with our heavenly Father that we “go crazy for joy” over Him.

A–In biblical terms, we call this “*Praise*” – an opportunity for us to literally “go crazy with joy” for God – to tell or show Him how much He means to us in physical, tangible ways, whether through singing, or clapping, or raising our hands in worship.

B–But while the notion of learning to praise God with our very being (just like dogs do for *their* master) is certainly important, it is actually NOT the main point I want to make today.

C–Instead, I believe that this quality of “*crazy joy*” when a dog is “*happy to see us*” not *only* describes how WE are to relate to GOD, more perhaps importantly, also **describes how GOD *already* relates to US!**

–III–

6. Think about today’s two scripture readings.

A–In the Zephaniah verse, God is described as one who “*rejoice[s] over [us] with gladness,*” who “*renews [us] in his love,*” and who “*will exult over [us] with loud singing.*”

1–Now, few of us would remember it, but I bet that many (if not most) of us here today had parents who *sung* to us when we went to bed at night as children or infants (and if you have kids you either did or still do!).

2–And some of you ladies out there may have been lucky enough to be serenaded in song by a man or boy who loved you, & wanted you to know it through his singing.

3–Well, here in the words of this Old Testament prophet (where God is often portrayed in harsh, judgmental terms), we instead find a compassionate God who loves us *so much* that He SINGS over us!!!

B–And then in the Luke 15 passage, Jesus is telling two stories known today as the “Parables” of “The Lost Sheep” and “The Lost Coin.”

1–But in *both* of them, notice that when the “lost” item is found, the owner/master calls together his friends and neighbors for a grand *celebration* of joy – a party!

2–In other words, we might just say that – like dogs who’re happy and excited to see us –when you & I come home to God, God gets excited & “*crazy for joy*” over us!

3–Jesus even says as much in Verse 10, “*Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*”

7. And what’s more, I think, is that the scriptures go on to teach us that God actually feels this *same* way about you and me even *before* we come home to Him!

A–In both the Old and New Testament it’s clear that God loves every one of us even before we *know* who God is, and even before we know to *seek* Him. ²

1–Author Tony Campolo once said that “*God carries your picture in his wallet.*” ³

2–And Pastor/Author James Moore even wrote a book a few years back titled If God Has A Refrigerator, Your Picture Is On It. ⁴

B– And if it’s true (as I said several weeks ago) that *God* is to be *our* “magnificent obsession,” then I believe it’s equally true to say that you & I (biblically) are also God’s “magnificent obsession”

C–WE’RE His “*great romance*”; the “*apple of his eye*”; the ones He “*delights*” in ⁵; each of us “*precious in his sight*,” “*honored*,” and loved deeply. ⁶

1–And even when we fail him, our worst mistakes and sins don’t negate His love.

2–Maybe you’ve heard it before, “*God knows the worst you’ll ever do and loves you anyway.*”

D–You see, I believe all of this is teaching and reminding us that the God of the Bible is a God who continuously gives *faithfulness* and *unconditional love* to us.

7. Friends, some of you may have grown up in homes, or lived in situations where you were either told or otherwise led to believe (perhaps by action or inattention) that you didn't really matter to anyone and anything.

A—Or it may even be that you or I have sometimes felt this way about *ourselves* NOT because of what some *else* said or did, but because of something *we've* said or done that make us think we're "unworthy" or "undeserving" of love or acceptance by God or others.

B—And yet, the great truth that not only today's scriptures but also our dog friends teach us is that no matter what other people *say*, or even what you or I have *done*, GOD (like a canine) is always "***Faithful and True, [and] Happy to See You***" (and me!).

C—In other words, not a one of us is *beyond* God's constant, faithful, unconditional love.

1—Now, more often than not, while this IS the kind of love *dogs* possess for *us* as their masters, it tends NOT to be the kind that *we* pass on to others. ⁷

2—So perhaps God created dogs in the first place not only to remind us to love *others* unconditionally, but also to remind us of the kind of unconditional love that GOD *already* has for each one of us! ⁸

D—And if in this series, we have learned nothing else but this, then I believe we'll have learned what God would have us understand from "**The Gospel According to Dogs.**"

8. [CLOSING PRAYER: "*Lord Jesus, we confess to you today our own human tendency to listen to and believe the world around us which tries to tell us that we are 'nobodies' and 'nothing' unless we do certain things or live life a certain way. Forgive us for our ignorance in listening to the words of the world, instead of to your words which tell us how absolutely precious and loved and valuable we each are in your eyes – that you are 'crazy in love' with us, and that you desire more than anything else that we come back to a right relationship with you.*

Today, we confess that some of us may have never realized this great love, and how far you are willing to go to bring us back home to you. So if that's where our heart is today, then help us right now to pray a prayer like this: 'Lord Jesus I accept your love and your forgiveness in my life. Today I choose to begin to follow you and to do what you want me to do as your disciple. I receive your Holy Spirit to do this. Thank you for your love.'

And for those who need renewal, help them to pray a prayer like this: 'Lord Jesus, I've given you my heart in the past, but I've let the cares of this world take over. So today, I give myself to you anew. Thank you that you are always faithful and true, even when I am not.' And Lord, wherever we are in our spiritual journey, continue to constantly remind us of your great, unconditional love, and help us to demonstrate it to others in our daily lives. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen."]

9. One of the tangible ways that God's unconditional love is illustrated and passed on to us today is through the celebration of "Holy Communion/The Lord's Supper."

A—In this sacrament, Jesus invites *any and all* present to receive tokens of his presence and power in our lives today.

B—You do not need to be a member of any particular church or denomination (or even to be a "born again" Christian yet), but merely to seek to follow God, and to live as best you know how a life consistent with that seeking.

10. [HOLY COMMUNION]

11. [CLOSING SONG FOR ALL SERVICES: #191, “Jesus Loves Me”]

ENDNOTES:

1. From the cartoon *Pickles*, “The Washington Post Writers Group,” cited in Robert Short, The Gospel According to Dogs, p. 27.

2. For example, read Psalm 139:13-16; Isaiah 49:1; and Romans 5:8. In the Wesleyan Christian tradition, we often refer to this theological concept as “*Prevenient Grace*” – the grace of God given to us before any conscious, personal awareness of that grace or presence.

3. Tony Campolo, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry #4751.

4. Nashville: Dimensions for Living Publishing, 2003. Available for purchase through www.cokesbury.com.

5. Read Isaiah 65:19; Jeremiah 31:20; and Deuteronomy 30:9.

6. Read Isaiah 43:3-4.

7. Humorist Josh Billings wrote “*A dog is the only thing on earth that loves you more than he loves himself*” (this quote shared with me by an East Cobb UMC member). In like fashion, George Graham Vest wrote that “*The one absolutely unselfish friend that a [person] can have in this selfish world is [their] dog.*” (Vest, cited in Robert Short, The Gospel According to Dogs, p. 27). Notice that this quality of perfect unselfishness (of absolute self-less-ness) also accurately describes the character and nature of God himself.

8. The great medieval theologian Julian of Norwich once wrote, “*God loves us and delights in us, and so he wishes us to love him and delight in him and trust greatly in him*” (Julian of Norwich, “Women in the Medieval Church,” Christian History, no. 30). In a similar manner, Robert Short writes that “*Christian love... must be unconditional love, a love that knows no limits. Sad to say, we can more often find instances of this kind of love in dogs than in people*” (Robert Short, The Gospel According to Dogs, p. 26).