

The Character of God

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[0 : 00] I'm speaking of, for those of you who don't know me, my name is Richard. I'm one of the volunteer pastors here at the table. I've been at the table for many years and have loved the opportunity to be here.

One of the things that I decided on today was that I was going to dress in flip flops and cargo shorts. Part of that is that my husband abandoned me for the weekend and went to New York.

He's back now, but that means I got to choose my own clothing. Which usually doesn't work out for anyone but me. But two, there's sort of a funny story.

And as any good pastor does, I can connect this outfit to the sermon, I promise. So when Richard first saw me at the table, he will describe you, and you should ask him the story, that I was wearing probably this exact outfit because I don't ever throw away clothing, which was cargo shorts with flip flops and some sort of t-shirt.

And his response to that was like, wow, they let anyone preach here. And there is a part of what we're going to talk about tonight, that character of God, which is what we're going to focus on, about that idea that really we are all invited into that co-creation.

[1 : 15] So yes, we do let anyone, even me, preach here. And you can determine whether that's good or bad at the end of this. But we are in a sermon series focused on what we believe. And part of why we're talking about this and taking the time to really dive into what we believe is that what we believe matters for the world that we create.

So a few weeks ago, Pastor Anthony introduced the sermon series, encouraging us as a community to focus on what we are moving forward. Pastor Tanetta followed by providing us a framework on how we are to wrestle with and understand who God is.

And Heidi delivered our message last week, focused on our beliefs that Trinity is at its root in relationship. This week we're focused on the character of God. Super simple to explain in 30 minutes, right?

Great. I'm glad one person believes that's true. I appreciate it. So before we begin, though, I do want to do a small activity. First, I want you to turn to a neighbor, tell them your name if you don't know them already, and identify one word that you would use to describe the character of God as you understand their character in your current faith practice.

One word. So now that we've all had that one word, and I heard lots of words happen, so I'm sure we got there, I want you to turn to a new neighbor, someone you're not talking with, and identify one word that was prescribed as descriptive of the character of God to you, either as a child or in a faith space, that you are actively unlearning or divesting from.

[2 : 49] So one word that was prescribed as a character of God that you are unlearning or divesting from. Okay. So I'm going to intentionally cut you off there, so I'm sure that you can continue those conversations later.

Now, I asked another group these exact questions before, just so that I'd have some examples without putting anyone on the spot. But, you know, when asked, that one word they would use to describe the character of God as they understand God's character in their current faith practice, words like present, patient, caring, intimate, loving, understanding, expansive, within us, and residing were used.

When asked to identify a word that was prescribed as descriptive, that they're actively unlearning or divesting from, words like vindictive, despotic, strict, demanding, angry, tracking, palling, and inflexible were used.

Now, some of those may resonate with what you just shared. You may have had whole different ideas. The point is that there's a lot of words to describe the character of God, both things that we may now be divesting from and things that we hold dear to our understanding of who God is.

And it's probably no surprise to any of you who know me well that this was a difficult sermon to write, mostly because I could think of a hundred different sermons that could have come from this topic of the character of God.

[4 : 16] But in the end, I realized that this sermon wasn't meant to be anything new or different. So we're going to focus on a truth that, honestly, I think most of you all know, that at the root, the character of God is love.

Out of all the characteristics of God, why settle on one so obvious? Because while I do believe that we know that the character of God is love, it seems to me that at times we don't trust that the character of God is love.

In other words, many of us can and do give the Sunday School answer, our intellectual understanding that God is love. But our orthopraxy, how we live out what we believe, reflects other beliefs that have effectively separated us from embracing God's character as love fully.

To aid in what I mean, I have invited some dinosaurs to help us out. At times, I think we're the triceratops in how we think about the character of God and love.

We're learning, we're trying, but not quite getting in. So as we focus on what we believe, the table church is intentionally challenging us to focus on what we are building rather than what we are leaving or pushing away.

[5 : 37] And that's important. But I also recognize that some in the church are still tearing down and need to acknowledge that we are still clearing the foundation, so to say, so that we can rebuild. This sermon is going to focus on what we understand to be the character of God as love.

What does that mean for our lives, and what does that mean for us as a church? And I'm going to ask you to engage in this conversation with an open heart and an open mind. To check in with yourself about how you feel during this conversation.

And part of why I want to acknowledge this space is because I had to acknowledge my own reticence to talk about love as the character of God because of my own experiences. Now, I don't want anyone to actually raise their hand, but I want to do a mental inventory right now.

How many have you had in your past one of those because I love you conversations? Okay. Mentally raise your hand. Don't say anything. I'll share what I mean.

I remember one from over 15 years ago. Because unfortunately, words are given meaning and can be defined differently by the experiences we have with them. So, back 15 years ago when I was first coming out to my faith community, an individual had one of those because I love you conversations.

[6 : 53] It started with God commands that we love everyone, and because I love you, it went something like this. She told me that because she loved me, she needed to tell me how hurtful my choice to live a life of sin was to her and our Christian community, only being gay.

She told me, because I love you, I need you to know you're going to hell because you refuse to repent. She told me, because I love you, I need to ask you to tell everyone you got busy and to step down from leadership so you don't hurt anyone anymore.

Effectively lying. Now, honestly, coming from a Baptist background, I've always understood love to be much more exclusionary than inclusionary anyways. So this wasn't very surprising.

But it did reinforce the idea that love, the love that we attribute to this God, was conditional, was earned, was able to be lost.

Now, over the years, I've come to realize that that is an understanding of love that is completely absent support in the Bible and in the person who is Jesus. So why did I share that?

[8 : 04] Because I want us to acknowledge that words can be corrupted. What we say only matters when what we say is what we live. So when we look at what we mean when we say God is love, we need to look at how God has demonstrated that to be true.

We cannot just rely on a word and leave it there, but must understand what that word demands of us. Now, we won't have time to unpack every question about the character of God in the next 25 minutes.

So I will say this up front, because there's going to be a lot of moments that aren't to speak. This is meant to be a starter of conversation. I'm not going to be able to give you all the answers. Frankly, I don't have them anyways.

But I do want us to be thinking together, and I will always extend this invitation. I love coffee and tea and ice cream and pizza and really anything else that you want to sit down and have a conversation over.

So you're always welcome to email me, reach out if you have questions, want to talk further, or even continue these conversations with other people. It doesn't have to be me. But I want to invite you to do that, because this conversation won't be done tonight.

[9 : 16] But there are two schematic principles that I'm going to ask us to operate from. The first is that God's character does not and has not changed. And the second is that God's character is shown through the life and ministry of Jesus.

So first, God's character has not changed. Now one thing I hear a lot over those coffees, teas, pizzas, bagels, muffins, whatever it may be, is this narrative that basically goes, I really like the God that Jesus talked about in the New Testament, but that Old Testament God I kind of initially just throw out.

Now, that could be a sermon in itself. Frankly, it could probably be a sermon series. But I think it's important to address, because if God's character can fundamentally change, then we can't trust God's character to remain the same for us.

Said differently, if God can be vindictive, controlling, or evil, or was these things in the past, then God can return to being that and therefore cannot be trusted.

But if we look at the Bible, look at the narrative from the beginning, God demonstrated their character. God created humanity in God's image, asking us to be in relationship with them.

[10 : 35] God made the world and determined it was good. First, from creation, we are told that we are meant to be in relationship with God, that God created us as an outpouring of their love.

J. Richard Milton explores the implications of being made in the image of God, which includes being rulers alongside God. He posits that Genesis 1 depicts God as a generous creator, sharing power with a variety of creatures, especially humans, inviting them and trusting them at some risk to participate in the creative and historical process.

Now there's some important words in there. Sharing power and inviting and trusting us to participate in the creative process. He describes this as an act of loving power.

Patrick Chang described the act of creation as God's outpouring of radical love, which spills out of the Trinity and overflows into created order.

From the very first pages, we see a God who is inviting us to participation, to be part of their story, to be co-creators.

[11 : 52] And that theme, the theme of sharing power and the theme of invitation to participation, continues throughout the Old Testament. Now, we don't have time to do a history lesson on the entire Old Testament in the next two minutes.

But one of the important arcs that we take from the Old Testament is the covenant cycle. We have a covenant with Adam, with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, with the priestly order, with David.

And as Christians, we believe in a new covenant brought by Jesus. Now, we won't talk about each of these, but what's important is that God has always loved and cared for people and wanted good for people.

A covenant is effectively contract, promise. It requires choice. You opt into it. And one of the fundamental understandings of love is that it is a choice.

And God has over and over again left open that choice for people. And when we fall short, God has reached out again and again and again because God's fundamental character is love.

[13 : 03] And God wants to invite us into a relationship of love with them. God is saying over and over again that I want to be in relationship with you and I want to invite you into relationship with me.

This is important because we see throughout the Old Testament a continued and consistent character of God as love over and over again.

Now, we as Christians believe that a new covenant, the one that we remember and celebrate every time we come to this communion table, is embodied in the incarnate God in Jesus Christ.

This means that God's character is shown through the life and ministry of Jesus. Now, if we read the letter of Colossians from Paul, we are told that Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

For by him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him.

[14 : 10] For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven making peace by the blood of his cross.

Colossians is a letter to the Gentiles in a Roman city and we see the same idea Christ as God reinforced in Hebrew, which is a letter to the Jewish followers of Jesus. There we read, long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.

But in these last days he has spoken to us by his son and he appointed the heir of all things through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, ministry, we see this idea of Jesus as God reinforced by his own words. And as Christians, we should have no doubt that Jesus, God incarnate, is the human manifestation of the God that has always existed.

This is not a new God with a new character, but the same God that has loved us throughout time. And again, while there are many parts or ways of describing the character of God, each comes back to this idea that God is all-loving.

[15 : 32] And that aspect of the character of God is a through line that we see throughout the wrestling with God and with who God is from Genesis to Revelation. But what then does it mean if we say that God's character is love?

In 1 Corinthians 13, 4-8, which you probably last heard at whatever wedding you went to this summer. But I promise was originally written to the church. We see love described as follows.

We're told that love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast. That it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful.

It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. This is a love described.

Patrick Chang, who is an assistant professor of historical and systematic theology, which means he's much smarter than me, described God as radical love, which is a love so extreme that it dissolves our existing boundaries.

[16 : 40] Whether they are boundaries that separate us from other people, that separate us from pre-fiction and ascension of Jesus Christ has dissolved the boundaries between death and life, time and eternity, and the human and the divine.

See, radical love dissolves boundaries between powerful and weak, between knowing and unknowing, between the in and the out. It is a love that is boundless because it actively works boundaries.

And we see this in the character of Jesus, who invites the uninvitable to his table and yet still includes no one. See, Jesus sits with the Pharisees and Sadducees who were the powerful at the time and also sits with the fishers and the carpenters and the tax collectors and the women and the children and the widow and the poor, the ritually clean and the ritually unclean.

Jesus' table has no boundaries. Reverend Peter Gomes described God's love in the following way. He says, to love God is one thing, but what is it to love what God loves?

This is not as easy as it sounds for God's love at times seems less discriminating than our own. We tend to love those things in persons agreeable to us. And the notion that God could love things that we cannot is a hard pill to swallow.

[18 : 14] Because if God loves all that he has made, and he has made everyone, not just ourselves, in his own image, then the commandment to love God means that we must love all who God has made, even those different from ourselves and disagreeable to us.

And see, when we look at the character of Jesus, we see love includes everyone. But we also see that love does not abide in injustice. We see even in the description of love in 1 Corinthians that love does not endure evil, but rejoices in truth.

Jesus spoke truth to those in power, challenged the Pharisees and Sadducees when they were wrong, disrupted the systems of oppression in his time, and undermined kings and kingdoms by his very existence.

Austin Channing Brown, another author, describes love as this. She says, I need a love that is troubled by injustice, a love that is provoked to anger when black folks, including our children, lie dead in the grave, a love that can no longer be concerned with tone because it is concerned with life, a love that has no tolerance for hate, no excuses for racist decisions, no contentment in the status quo.

I need a love that is fierce and it's resilience and sacrifice. I need a love that chooses. So when we say that God is all loving, we need to understand what that means.

[19 : 48] It's not just loving what we want God to love, or it's not just loving when it's convenient for us to show love. In fact, I honestly think at times we are weary to really embrace an all-loving God because of the implications it has on how we are then called to live.

See, the far more audacious calling is not judgment of others, which we are all actually pretty good at. It is loving others. So what does this mean for our lives?

And if we acknowledge the character of God is love, and we understand that the character of God calls us into co-creation as image bearers of God, there are some serious implications to that.

Like I said, I actually think it's easier to believe in a disconnected, disillusioned, coercive, and controlling God because that allows us to abdicate our responsibility.

See, if God is singularly in control, if I have no agency, then I can ignore the atrocities of the world. I can do nothing because it's God's will after all, right?

[21 : 02] But if we recognize that God is love, and we recognize that God is calling us into relationship as image bearers and co-creators, and that we are part of those acting out God's will on earth, that we are that part of God's will on earth, then we have to act in line with the character of God, which is love.

We are called to act because of love. We are no longer permitted to be idle, to sit and do nothing. So what does it mean to act because of love?

I want to focus on a few things. Now, the first to be brief on, but if God's character is love, and we are image bearers of God and therefore God's character, then you must accept that you are endowed with inherent work that can neither be earned nor lost.

Because if God's character is love and we are that image, we are also deserving of love. If God's character is love and we understand love to be non-coercive, then we have to make a decision.

See, love, the love that we talked about that breaks down barriers, that is audacious enough to be big enough for everyone, the love that is central to the character of God requires choice.

[22 : 31] The character of God as love challenges our understanding of God as a sovereign dictator and moves us towards co-creator and persistence. Love requires choice.

Otherwise, it's merely obedience or acquiescence. Love is a decision and every day opts in, which requires so much more.

Now, we can trust that God chooses to love us every day. That is literally written in the scriptures. And God will never stop doing that. But we, as image bearers of God, as co-creators and bringers of heaven on earth, are then also called to choose love each and every day, to opt in.

Now, that does not mean we're ever going to be a representation of perfect love, as Christ on earth was. In fact, Reverend Gomes pushes against this fallacy, stating, the question should not be what would Jesus do, but rather, more dangerously, what would Jesus have me do?

The onus is not on Jesus, but on us. For Jesus did not come to act semi-divine human beings to do impossible things. He came to ask human beings to live up to their full humanity.

[23 : 48] He wants us to live in the full implications of our human gifts, and that is far more demanding. See, we are called to be part of this pouring out love.

And if God's character is love, and we understand that love to be that radical love that dissolves existing boundaries, then we must live out a love that is inclusive.

God's love is not conditioned on who you are. If anything can be drawn from Jesus' ministry on this earth, it was that point that no one is outside of God's love.

No one. And that can honestly be kind of scary, possibly upsetting, and frustrating. I'll return to Reverend Gomes one more time.

I think his words are powerful here. He writes that the claim of a God bigger than those who worship him, more gracious, more generous, more hospitable than they are, is at the core of what Jesus calls the good news of the gospel.

[24 : 52] And it ought to be good news that God is bigger than we are. This goes back to that reality, right? We are called into love. We're going to be imperfect at it.

But at the same time, the idea that God is bigger than us should be a comfort. It's not scary. Now, Jesus time and time again demonstrated love extending beyond boundaries, beyond traditional norms.

And we as followers of Jesus and as image bearers of God are commissioned to do the same. We are called to break down boundaries. Finally, if God's character is love, and we understand that love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, and instead rejoices with the truth, then we as pro-creators need to seek justice.

Patrick Chang described sin as the rejection of radical love. That is, he writes, if God has radical love, in other words, a love so extreme that it dissolves all kinds of boundaries, then sin is what opposes God, or what opposes radical love.

Sin is the resistance to dissolving boundaries and division. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said it this way, God places us in the world as his fellow worker agents of transfiguration.

[26 : 15] We work with God so that injustice is transfigured into justice, so there will be more compassion and caring, that there will be more laughter and joy, that there will be more togetherness in God's world.

See, love requires us to speak truth in our community, to call out systems of oppression, to challenge structures that perpetuate division, because love, I believe, demands this in a way that also creates invitation, but does not compromise on justice.

Jesus never backed down from truth for the sake of false peace. He spoke truth and invited people into true peace. That's what we're called to do.

Now, this again, with all of these points probably leaves a lot more to be said, so perhaps this is just the start of a discussion, because God's character of love requires us to be truth tellers while being boundary dissolvers.

This is why Jesus was perfect, and we will never be. But this is also where that check-in is so important, because judgment and exclusion and hate can all match as love behind truth.

[27 : 33] But the beauty of the gospel, I believe, is that Jesus both spoke truth, but genuinely sought community with those he was speaking truth to.

He didn't wait until they were perfect, but instead dined with them even as he challenged them. And that is a difficult act that we need to unpack in discussion.

Again, perhaps over coffee or tea or in small groups. For now, I'm just inviting you to ponder what this would look like in your life. I'm also asking us to think about what this means for the table church as a community, because our call to live out the character of God as love is not limited to us alone, but also expands to us as a community of believers.

Now, as a community, I want us to challenge ourselves to make choices that recognize our role in living out God's character of love. We have to ask what this means about how we're involved in church, what it means for who we engage with, what it means for the types of programs that we do, what it means for how we have tough conversations with each other, what it means for how we care about one another.

Now, I will be honest, every church is inherently flawed in that it is a human institution making an effort to be a place for people to meet God.

[28 : 57] love. But that means that all the more, we need to keep making the choice to be loved as a community, to question how we are dissolving boundaries, to challenge each other on what love in action looks like.

So again, today's sermon really is meant to be a beginning of a conversation. It's meant to help us challenge ourselves to truly trust what we probably already intellectually know, that the character of God is love, that character has not and does not change, and is revealed more fully through the life and ministry of Jesus.

That if we accept that God's character is love, and that we are made in God's image as part of that radical outpouring of love, then we have to acknowledge that we are called to be representations of that love on earth, and that requires action.

love. And that as a table church community, we must challenge ourselves to embrace the radical vision of love that God's character demands, and push our institution to reflect the principles that love is unconditional, love is a choice, love is inclusive, and love requires justice.

Let us pray. God, we come to this space together as a community. We thank you for being an ever-abiding consistent existence of love.

[30 : 28] Lord, we pray that as we continue to wrestle with what that means, that you work in us and help us understand more fully what you are calling us to be participating in.

We pray these things in your name. Amen.