

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer  
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Stay in Love with God

Here are some questions for you:

Is love a noun or verb?

Is love a word we say or something or something we do?

Both, right?

Okay, how about this:

Is staying in a long-term relationship with someone the same as staying in love with that someone?

Not necessarily, right?

The third simple rule for a Wesleyan way of living is “to stay in love with God”. And the reason for asking the questions I asked is because they’re relevant, I think, to what this rule for living might mean to us. Because to stay in love with God requires us to understand love as more than something we have, and more than something we say. It also requires us to understand being in relationship with God as something more than just being in relationship.

For we don’t just have love, are to be loving. We don’t just say we love God, we practice that love. And we can more than a relationship with God, we can stay in love with God.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, described the third General Rule for the United Societies as “attending upon all the ordinances of God”, and as I have done for rules one and two, I will again read Wesley’s own words, as found in our United Methodist Book of Discipline:

“It is expected of all who desire to continue in these societies that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation, Thirdly: By attending upon all the ordinances of God; such are: The public worship of God. The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded. The Supper of the Lord. Family and private prayer. Searching the Scriptures. Fasting or abstinence”. (Par. 103, p 74).

The ordinances of God are the public and private practices of our faith, and they are the ways that our loving relationship with God is demonstrated and maintained. Remember what Moses told the people of Israel: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your

soul, and with all your might.” Then comes this exhortation, “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart”. How? “Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are home and when you are way, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates”. Reciting them, talking about them, writing them down, fixing them on the doorposts --- these are all ways that the people of Israel can maintain and demonstrate their love for God.

Paul makes a similar point in his letter to the Colossians: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving”. It’s the continuing to live your lives in him that today’s rule is all about. It’s not enough to fall in love with God --- we are to continue, or to stay, in love with God.

So.....does God need us to do these things? Is God’s love for us dependent on how we “attend” to these “ordinances”, or in our way of putting it, on how “practice these spiritual disciplines?” Does God need us to pray, to read and study his holy word, to worship as a congregation, to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion?

I suppose not. I suppose God’s love for us is independent of our love for God. The Bible tells that story pretty clearly. For over and over again God keeps reaching out even when God’s people turn away. Over and over again, God keeps on loving, even when God’s love is ignored or rejected.

So why do all these things? I want you think now about the best and most important human relationship you’ve ever been part of. Is or was it a one-sided or two-sided relationship? Are or were you the giver or the receiver? Both? Well, that’s what I mean. We can have a one-sided relationship with God, I guess, in which God does all the giving and we do all the receiving, but what kind of relationship is that? Is it a relationship for the long haul? Will it strengthen over time? Will it be the kind of relationship that we consider the very best we could have?

The rule to stay in love with God isn’t a means to an end – it’s not a matter of, “if we do these things then God will love us more”. No, the rule to stay in love with God is all about the quality of our relationship with God. It’s about giving that relationship the time and attention it needs --- no, it deserves.

The Bible is still the Bible, of course, whether we ever read it or not. We can even say it’s still God’s Word. But it’s not a word that will guide or comfort or strengthen or change our lives if it’s a word we don’t know or spend time with or talk about.

Likewise, we can worship God anywhere, of course. We don’t need a structure, a building, or an established routine to praise God, to talk and listen to God, to contemplate God, to give thanks to God. But here’s the catch --- when we’re on the golf course, for example, on a beautiful Sunday morning or afternoon, do we worship God, or are we really out there having a good time playing golf? When we’re at home on a Sunday morning, do we worship God, or do we really just enjoy sleeping in or having a

nice breakfast or reading the newspaper, or maybe working in the garden? We can worship God other places, but do we?

Here's what Reuben Job says about this third rule:

“Spiritual disciplines teach us to live our lives in harmony with something larger than ourselves and larger than the world values as ultimate.....Living in the presence of and in harmony with the living God who is made known in Jesus Christ and companions us in the Holy Spirit is to live life from the inside out. It is to find our moral direction, our wisdom, our courage, our strength to live faithfully from the One who authored us, called us, sustains us, and sends us into the world as witnesses. Spiritual disciplines keep us in that healing, redeeming presence and power of God that forms and transforms each of us more and more into the image of the One we seek to follow. We may name our spiritual disciplines differently, but we too must find our way of living and practicing those disciplines that will keep us in love with God – practices that will help keep us positioned in such a way that we may hear and be responsive to God's slightest whisper of direction and receive God's promised presence and power every day and in every situation. It is in these practices that we learn to hear and respond to God's direction. It is in these practices that we learn to trust God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is in these practices that we learn of God's love for us. It is where our love for God is nurtured and sustained. Incorporating these practices in our way of living will keep us in love with God and assure us of God's love for us in this world and the world to come” (Three Simple Rules, Abingdon Press, 2007, pp. 54-55).

Today we are celebrating many of the ways we can stay in love with God here at Church of the Redeemer --- Sunday School, Bible Study, worship, Holy Communion. I encourage you to make yourselves available to these ways --- to get involved in some kind of learning experience here at our church, to join the Active Redeemer Men on Sunday mornings as they share their walk of faith with each other, to be part of Sisters in Spirit as they grow closer to God and to each other, to sing in the choir or to ring bells or to serve as a liturgist in worship, to be in a prayer group perhaps, or to help take communion to our homebound and sick members. Staying in love with God is a lifetime commitment, you know. As such, it can be a stagnant or a vital commitment. It can be one that drains us or empowers us. It can be ho-hum or it can be passionate. The quality of our relationship with God is up to us. May it be all that it can be --- for each of here, and for us together as a church.

When you come forward today to receive the bread and wine of communion, you will also receive this bookmark – a little reminder for each of us of a way to live that is really living, a way that gives meaning and purpose and direction to our lives, a way that truly makes a difference. It's the Wesleyan, or the Methodist way, and today we reclaim that way for ourselves – as we commit ourselves as individuals and as a church to:

Do no harm  
Do good  
and Stay in love with God.

