<Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; Matthew 22:34-46>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

I’d like to begin with a point of personal privilege with this sermon, if I may, so that I might tell you that the love affair began nineteen years ago.

Nineteen years and four days, to be precise.

And no, before anyone’s mind starts to panic that their minister is admitting to a scandal from the pulpit, this love affair has nothing to do with worldly relationships, though it does have everything to do with worldly relationships. But certainly there has been no impropriety. Rather, it is the same love affair that has existed within any minister worth their salt in pastoral relationship, though the degree to which I live up to that measure would be up to you to determine. No, this is the love affair which exists between the Divine Source of Love and those who, hearing God’s voice telling them to ‘go,’ actually listen and attempt to faithfully go. You have known several such people within this congregation, though you have known far fewer than many other congregations in this day and age. It is the love affair which has existed since the time of Moses, and we see the fullest evidence of that on display in our reading this morning from Deuteronomy, as we close out Moses’ role in the story of the people known as Israel. And how could it be anything but an affair, a torrid rollercoaster of a relationship which brings the fullness of life while simultaneously feeling like it is going to be the end of you? Mine began nineteen years and four days ago. God’s love affair with the people of God, all of you included, began much, much longer ago.

Moses has led the people, as faithfully as he has humanly been able to do, and it has not always been an easy job or journey. We have seen the truth of that in our readings, and we have hinted at more of that dynamic in all the readings we skipped over. The calling of God through a bush that burned but was not consumed in the wilderness, while Moses thought he wanted to be nothing more than a simple shepherd. God would have him be a shepherd, though far from simple.

We have seen the truth of it in the sending of Moses back to Pharaoh, to Egypt, to the long-remembered days of his youth and the ghosts which still haunted him, and to a people in need, so much need that it made God’s heart break and Pharaoh’s heart harden. Moses went, because God loved him and he was discovering that he loved God. Moses went, returning, and faced down Pharaoh’s hardened heart in order to enact deliverance for God’s people. Moses even became the conduit of ten miraculous warnings showcasing the might and power of God not only to Pharaoh but to the people who barely remembered God, themselves.

We have seen the truth of this as Moses led the people out of Egypt and to the shores of the Red Sea, and across the dry seabed to the other side, and then into the unknown, unfamiliar wilderness. Moses even led the people through the unknown, unfamiliar wilderness, as much a physical unknown as a spiritual one, because the people were learning to recognize God again, to be aware of God’s intimate presence

anew. They grumbled. They cursed. They were afraid and anxious and they broke commandments and then they grumbled and cursed and questioned some more. And every time, Moses was there, falling more and more in love, more and more caught up in the greatest love affair the world perhaps has ever known. Romeo & Juliet have nothing when it comes to God & Moses, or to God & the people.

Moses led the people through it all, and as he did so he fell more in love with the people and even more in love with God. For how else could Moses, when facing down God’s anger and disappointment in the people, threatening to destroy them and start over again, how else could Moses have stood his own ground and held God accountable to a covenant promise, if not for love?

Do we grasp the fullness of this? Even those of us who have loved and celebrated the love of a spouse for over six decades or more, can we grasp the fullness of all that this love affair with God encompasses?

Marcus Mumford, of the band Mumford & Sons, sings in one of their more recent songs the poetic words which reflect the depth of this love. “Reach across again / Here’s where heaven starts / I end where you begin / With my hand over your heart” (*Conversation With My Son, 2026*).

Similarly, Irish singer/songwriter Hozier, on such love reflects, “I really like the idea of love as a violent act, not to the person that you love but against the world.” The idea that such love centers the person, the relationship, above and ahead of any other earthly, worldly demand that might try to subvert it, even up to the point of death. It is a love which subverts Empires and turns the accepted order of the world on its head. It is the love which redefines all of our living, and even our understanding of death, and can guide all of us into fuller relationship with one another and with the One who loved us first.

My true love affair with God began nineteen years and four days ago, when I was ordained and committed to love God and to love the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, love and prayer. It has been challenged and shaken many, many times along the way, and it has likewise been refreshed each and every time.

When did your love affair begin?

The Pharisees, the chief priests, the scribes, the Sadducees and the Herodians all seem to think that Jesus has come solely to undermine them and take away their power and influence, their role and place in society. He has, but not in the way that they fear. Rather, Jesus has come not to subvert but to invite - to be an example himself of how each, every, and any of us might truly live a life in the fullness of the love of God, and how that will look. Yes, it will change everything these leaders, and even us today, thinks about the world around us, but it will be the fullest expression of who we are, at the same time. We may end up giving up power, or status, or worldview, but we will receive and live into so much more than we can imagine.

The longer I reflect on this, the more I am convinced that Jesus was not merely offering a response to a legalistic question posed to him by the Pharisees about which is the greatest commandment. And, did you notice? Jesus’ response was not actually one of the Ten Commandments. Rather, in Jesus’ words, the greatest commandment is that “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” And then Jesus adds a secondary clause which is so intertwined that it cannot be separated: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

“On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

But this is not merely a cerebral command, one to be academically known and debated and parsed and discussed. More and more I come to believe that this commandment is, in fact, an invitation to enter more fully into the love affair that awaits us all, a love affair with the One who has first loved each and every one of us. Each and every person out there in the world. Each and every person who lives, and breathes, and yearns to be filled with such love themselves.

And this is violent, make no mistake. It will rise up in righteous passion on behalf of each and every person to proclaim against a world which would label and demean and reduce any of them, and exclaim instead, ‘you shall not! You shall not reduce the one whom I love, and hold, alongside whom heaven is realized and proclaimed.’ This is the love of God.

It is a love which endures. A love which remains. A love which abides even though the world around us might shake and tremble. A love that knows our names and which will not forsake or leave us. And how can I know this? Because it is this love, on full display, which enables God to remain with Moses even as his life reaches its end, and then to bury him in a place unknown to anyone else but known intimately to God. Moses abides in God’s heart.

The world abides in God’s heart. We abide in God’s heart.

We think we need and we wait for a God who would come and destroy all that is wrong in the world, which just so happens to align with all that we disagree with. Instead, we find the God who reshapes the world in a love that is so tender, so powerful, so abiding that it can grieve and bury and be present in all times, places, and situations. That is the God who loves us, still, today.

The God who buried Moses is the God who walks alongside us still. The love affair awaits each of us, even we who have entered into it in the past, however many years, or days, or even hours ago that was. The love affair with the God who loves begins anew with each breath. And God’s people are still being delivered today. Amen.

(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)