



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON - April 6, 2008

Pass It On (All You Need Is Love- Part II)
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1 John 4:13-21

¹³ *By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.* ¹⁴ *And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.* ¹⁵ *God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.* ¹⁶ *So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.* ¹⁷ *Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.* ¹⁸ *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.* ¹⁹ *We love because he first loved us.* ²⁰ *Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.* ²¹ *The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*

Have you ever noticed how you can tell people there are more than a billion, billion stars in the universe and they'll believe you, but tell them the paint is wet and they'll touch it to see if you're telling the truth? Explain the circuitry that enables a single satellite to handle 12,000 phone calls simultaneously and our eyes glaze over, but hand us an "Etch-A-Sketch," and we're determined to figure out how it works. It has something to do with a scale we can comprehend, something to do with proximity, something to do with personal participation.

And so it is with our understanding God. When I read of God's awesome acts of creation, I don't really feel a need to understand the details, but when I read that God has a plan to turn the scratchy likes of us into a peaceable kingdom, now God's got my full attention. When Jesus says he has come to bring the kingdom of heaven near, when he prays that our divisions might yield to love, now I want to ask God just exactly how that's going to work.

Last week, we asked: how do we see God? How might we recognize God in our lives? This week, I want to ask: how does God get the job done? How we might participate in God's providential plan?

Last week, 1 John 4:7-12 offered us the short answer that, "God is love." John taught that nobody has ever seen God, but that we know God, we experience God, by loving and being loved by our neighbor as God loves us.

This week, 1 John 4:13-21 offer us the short answer that is again, you guessed it, "God is love." According to John, God gets the job done – God moves creation towards the promised Providence – by setting off chain reactions of love that ripple through all of creation and down throughout all of time. Jesus loved his disciples, and the disciples loved their followers, and their followers loved those they encountered and so on down through the ages. Look forward into the future and you can see loving acts begetting loving acts and loving words begetting loving words. But look back into the past and you will see that, ultimately, the love always traces back to the God who is love. John writes, in 4:19: "We love because he first loved us."

O.K., "We love because God first loved us." But how do you suppose that works? John explains that God first loved us by sending his Son as the Savior of the world. All right, but how does that work? How does God nudge us into loving, nudge creation forward by loving us first through Christ? What is the dynamic of this chain reaction? How does it work?

I want to set before you two alternative scenarios – you might call them dueling parables – for how God might send God's love rippling down through history. Let's call the first scenario, the "Private Ryan" scenario, and let's call the second scenario, the "Trucker Dave" scenario.

Here's the Private Ryan scenario. Most of you know it already, I'm stealing it directly from Steven Spielberg's great movie, *Saving Private Ryan*.

Tom Hanks played Captain John Miller. Miller had just survived fighting his way ashore on D-Day when he was recruited to lead an eight-man unit behind German lines to find and rescue Private James Ryan. Ryan's three brothers had all been killed in action, and the Army brass had decided that Ryan had to be found and sent home safely.

Miller successfully leads his men through the confusion and dangers of the Normandy battles to find and save Private Ryan, but Miller and all his comrades are killed in the effort. As Captain Miller lies dying, he pulls Ryan close to him and whispers hoarsely into Ryan's ear, "Earn it."

The movie ends with a scene in a Normandy graveyard 50 years later. As an aging James Ryan kneels before Miller's grave, Miller's last words still echo in Ryan's ears, "Earn it."

So that's the "Private Ryan Scenario." Here's the alternative scenario, the "Trucker Dave Scenario." When I was 19, I caught some rides to California. After wearing out my welcome with a college roommate's family, I set out to see as much of California as I could see in just two weeks and for just \$80. I rented some camping gear for \$40, bought \$25 of dehydrated food, and set out hitchhiking from Santa Barbara to San Francisco with just \$15 in my pocket.

Over the next two weeks I worked my way up to San Francisco, across to Sacramento and then Reno, down to Yosemite, and then back down south and west toward Los Angeles. By the time I was passing through Fresno, I was tired, dirty, broke – and really, really sick of dehydrated chicken à la king.

I caught a ride outside Bakersfield with an old fellow named Dave driving a beat-up Oldsmobile. Dave had driven an 18-wheeler for twenty-five years before a ruptured disc forced him to retire. He lived with his wife in a trailer, making do on his meager Social Security disability check.

We were an oddly matched pair driving across the valley. I don't know what Dave really made of my late-sixties uniform of tangled hair and dirty bell bottoms, but we talked easily for two or three hours. When it came time for me to get out, Dave dug into his pocket and pulled out a five-dollar bill. "Here," he said, pushing the crumpled bill into my hand, "this might come in handy."

I was kind of dumbfounded by Dave's generosity, for it had been evident from our conversation how hard up he was for cash. I pushed the bill back towards him, telling him I couldn't possibly take it, and lying about how I'd be fine without it.

"Listen," Dave said, "thirty years ago I was hitchhiking across South Dakota, hungry and cold. An old farmer took me in and gave me a warm meal and a bed for the night. When I asked the farmer how I could ever thank him, the farmer told me someone had done the same for him. He told me just to pass it on someday like he was passing it on to me. So, there you go," Dave said, "I'm passing it on to you. Someday you pass it on as well."

There are my two dueling parables, the "Private Ryan" scenario ends in "Earn it." The "Trucker Dave" scenario ends in "Pass it on."

"Earn it" and "Pass it on" – both are inspiring farewells. You can see how each could inspire a chain reaction of loving and selfless acts. But how different they are! How different they feel – how differently they operate! Which do you think reflects the way God's love operates in the world? "Earn it" or "Pass it on"?

Surely, "Earn it" inspires Private Ryan. I think Spielberg meant it to inspire every person in the theater. And it does. But do you think this is the way God acts through Christ? When we see Ryan kneeling before Miller's grave, we can see the commitment with which he lived his life, but can't we also see the terrible weight on his shoulders, they are so stooped as he kneels – an entire lifetime spent with a charge to redeem the lives of the eight men who died saving him. Who could live up to that burden?

Can you imagine Christ whispering on the cross, "Earn it"? And as inspired as you or I might be by Christ's sacrifice, does anyone here believe that they deserve or

that they could live up to the demand of “earning” the death of God’s Son on a cross? Can’t you feel your shoulders sag at the prospect? Would anyone call this “good news”?

On the other hand, I was filled with gratitude when I got out of Dave’s car, and I couldn’t wait for an opportunity to pass it on. I still remember Dave’s wadded up \$5 bill these thirty-eight years later. And I still look for little ways to pass it on to strangers I meet traveling. Just a little act of kindness rippling through a Depression-era farmer, through Dave, and on into the future.

And you know, I *could* see Christ whispering “Pass it on” on the cross. And in John’s Gospel, he says something very similar in his farewell to his disciples. At John 15:9, Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you” and then at 15:12, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Pretty close to “Pass it on.” And pretty easy to experience as “good news.”

Do you see how different “Earn it” and “Pass it on” are? “Earn it” is demand; and “Pass it on” is gift. “Earn it” is duty; “Pass it on” is gratitude. “Earn it” is law; “Pass it on” is grace.

We humans seem to have an irresistible tendency to turn our religions, even Christianity, into religions of “Earn it,” religions of law. But the inner message of Christianity, the gospel of Jesus the Christ is not “Earn it” – it’s “Pass it on” – it’s grace.

How does God’s love get the job done? How does God move God’s creation towards God’s Providence: with unearned love that inspires grateful hearts. With love that whispers, “Pass it on.”

You might call church the great school room of passing it on. We practice passing it on every time we serve and every time we worship.

Church is where we practice passing it on every time we serve on an OG mission trip. Just last week, 28 members of our church, overflowing with gratitude for God’s blessings in their lives, took a week of their time to pass it on: rebuilding homes, tutoring kids, and feeding other volunteers.

Mary Streep wanted to do more than just rebuild a home, she wanted to add beauty and hope in a New Orleans neighborhood where half of the homes are still abandoned. So she finished off a week of construction by helping plant shrubs and flowers around the foundation.

But it’s hard to pass blessings on to others faster than God can pass blessings on to you. As an old farmer once put it, “I keep shoveling God’s blessings out to others, but God keeps shoveling God’s blessings in to me – and God’s got a larger shovel!”

So, Thursday night, Mary led off OG vespers with a prayer of gratitude, “I wanted to add some beauty to Lorraine’s home, but as I was planting the flowers, God gave me a vision of even greater beauty. I looked at the flowers and saw what beautiful, divine creations they were. But then, as I looked up and saw you all working your hearts out for a woman you had never even met, I saw that each of you are God’s creations, God’s flowers as well.” And then, sobbing, Mary concluded, “I’m so grateful God gave me an opportunity to see how truly beautiful each of you are.”

Of course, after that, the gift just kept on passing on, as 27 otherwise reasonably circumspect New Canaanites collapsed around Mary in a long, damp-eyed, group hug.

And Church is where we symbolize and experience this “Pass it on” every time we share communion. This table represents at least three different dimensions of “Pass it on.”

First, the bread and cup represent the body and blood of Christ. Christ’s words remind us to “Do this in remembrance of me.” We remember, we re-experience the love of God in Christ, the love present to each of us in Christ’s Holy Spirit, and we are inspired to pass it on.

Second, the very persistence of this 2000-year-old rite, reminds us of the 100 generations of faithful Christians who persevered through persecution, famine, plague, war, and depression to pass on this church, these teachings, this ritual, and this gift down to us. We are moved to pass it on to our children and their children.

Finally, we pass the bread and cup from hand to hand. We recall that Christ taught us to love one another as

he has loved us. "We love because he first loved us."
My friends, the chain reaction God set in motion at
Calvary now comes literally into your hands. Pass it
on. **Amen.**