**Springfield Presbyterian Church**

**June 26th, 2022**

**Perfect Love Casts Out Fear**

1. A World Desperately in Need of Love

As I began to write the sermon for our service this morning, I felt

this strong sense that we needed this service. We need this service because we are a world desperately in need of love, unity, and inclusion. You may say to me – I’m not LGBT+, but the chances of you knowing someone who is on the spectrum of sexuality or gender is very likely. This service is for everyone, for God’s love can speak to us all.

 Before I come to the Scripture at hand, I want to share a few things. I recognize that I have a privilege and responsibility at this pulpit and it is one that I take very seriously. As someone who is on the LGBT+ spectrum, I feel a deep need to speak truth to power through the lens of God’s Word and I know that I could not be up here if brave folx did not speak up, so that all LGBT+ people can be ministers of Word and Sacrament.

 I also know that the Church has been deafening silent or, at worse, cruel and judgmental toward the LGBT+ community. It is time for the silence to stop. It is time to for that cruelty to end. There is no place for that in God’s house, there’s no place for that in the hearts of God’s people. Springfield, you welcomed me when I was in a same-sex relationship, you have been and continue to be in the minority of churches in this area who openly vocalize that God’s love is for all. I not only encourage you, but urge you, to continue to be that voice in our community that points to God and points to love and inclusion that goes beyond our societies understanding of what should be normative or acceptable. Jesus was radical – continue to follow Christ by being radical in all you do and say.

 You may ask, does it matter? What difference can I make? You can make a huge difference. I won’t go through all the statistics, because they are lengthy, but here are a few important notes. LGBT youth are 120% more likely to experience homelessness over heterosexual youth – and I can tell you from encounters in our county in speaking with organizations, that this is a boots on the ground problem here in Carroll county and, of course, further afield. Three quarters of LGBT youth say that they have faced discrimination based upon their sexual identity. Over 50% of LGBT Americans have hid their sexual orientation and/or relationships to avoid discrimination.

 These are all hard statistics to hear, but they are also very real and need to be heard. Where is our place in these statistics? We are people who can be safe spaces, to hear and encourage our youth and adults who are questioning their sexuality or gender. We can actively celebrate, as we are today, God’s diversity, and take it into our neighborhoods.

 We also have so much to learn, myself included. On a regular basis, I’m learning a new term in the LGBT spectrum. There’s more than a rainbow flag, but many flags representing many different forms of sexualities. We also in the last few years have been enlightened to understand a non-binary world, where gender is not only a physical representation, but one that we feel and understand. If this offers any help to those of you who feel overwhelmed by all this knowledge – I admit that I’m still getting used to the them/they pronoun. I have nothing against it, it’s just not in my vocabulary yet, but I will continue to learn and grow. We can learn together.

 Something I won’t be going into today, but I’d be delighted to in a class setting is where Christians have falsely claimed LGBT people to be at odds with the Bible. People have cherry picked the Bible, and at times, lets be honest, we all have – we go to the Scripture that fits our lens, that makes us comfortable, and aligns with our views. Yet those who have chosen the Bible as a fortress against LGBT+ people need to lovingly hear the truth in love – that there are cultural, translational, and generational issues that lie within that can be interpreted differently than what is initially in print.

1. Let’s Get to the Scriptures

Now, without delay, let us get to the Scriptures at hand for

today. I’d like to first focus our reading from 1 John and how it fully embodies this sense that God is indeed love and in following God’s lead, we are to be a people of love. In particular, I have been fond of this phrase for many years, ‘there is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear.’

 I sometimes wonder if issues around LGBT+ acceptance and inclusion come out of fear. My big question though is…what do you fear? Fear can sometimes be a natural response to love and I’ve spoken to this before – for love requires us to be vulnerable, to be authentic, and fully ourselves. Love makes you put your heart on your sleeve and that can be scary, indeed, that can be fearful thing. Perhaps that’s why love is so radical – and we now, through Christ, have this example of what perfect love can look like.

 If Christ can have the beautiful audacity to love us so much that he can give up his own life for the sake of ours, then we can dare to love. In fact, we are commanded to love. So, my friends, let’s do something that is both easy and difficult in one breath – let us love – let us love without exception, even when it challenges our understandings or creates difficult conversations or questions.

 Our first reading today was from the Psalms and the psalms can often be thought of as songs. They have a different flow than the rest of our Scripture, with a particular meter and style in different parts of the book of Psalms. Again, if you’d ever like to nerd out with me on the Psalms, I’d be more than happy to join you in taking a deeper look.

 The psalm we have read this morning, Psalm 139, is a love song to our Savior. It brings light to the God who knows us from inside out, who created us, who knows our every breath in a comforting way. God’s right hand will hold us, he will shield us, he will protect us. Even when we think we are far from God, even if we set ourselves to the ends of the very Earth – God is still there. This pairs with a favorite verse of mine in Romans – this sense that there is nothing, nothing in this world that takes us away from God’s love.

 I kind of wish I could hand out Psalm 138 to all Christians to stick on their refrigerator or corkboard and whenever a doubt comes into your mind of God’s love – read it. Read it from beginning to end. Read it a few times over. Read it until you remember who and whose you are.

 It is these Scriptures that are often put on the backburner when we come to difficult topics, but are perhaps the most driving, comforting, and challenging passages that lead us to a true sense of God’s calling on our lives.

1. Take Pride

My friends, I hope you take pride in all of who you are,

regardless of your sexuality, gender, race, beliefs - because you are beloved. You are beloved of God. You are beloved of this community. And then in your belovedness, go take it out into this world and show all that they are also beloved. Tell them, remind them, call them, text them, annoy them with love – because you can’t drown in the waters of love, it only lifts you up, and lets you float in God’s grace. As you go from this place, may only the words on your lips be ones of love, this day and always. Amen.