

**Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard**  
**“The Freedom To Do Good”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, June 30, 2019**

**Deuteronomy 30**

*When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the Lord your God has scattered you. Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. The Lord your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*

**Galatians 5:1, 13-25**

*Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.*

*See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.*

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, you call us to love, to serve, and yet, at times, we struggle within and in response to others. So as we struggle with your Word this day, may it offer us wisdom and hope. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

When I began grad school in Boston, I needed a place to live. Gail, who was a friend of mine from elementary school, was staying on in Boston to get her library science degree, and there was a room available in her place. It was just a short trolley ride to the university. So I jumped at the chance to live with an old friend and make some new friends.

Late in the semester, the age-old struggle of procrastination raised its anxious head. You know what I mean. Yeah. It was early December, and all things were coming due, and Gail wanted an extension on her paper. And her professor's response was, "No extension. Bring whatever you have on the due date." And then she said, "Gail, you'll find through discipline comes freedom." And that really stuck with her. One night, probably after procrastination break, for we were watching Star Trek reruns, we started talking about what she might have meant. And I realized then that discipline is not just about punishment. It's about setting boundaries and borders that help us keep on track. Being disciplined from within, as in self-disciplined, is an approach to life that can offer freedom. Freedom from unnecessary anxiety and stress and feeling overwhelmed. It's about learning to prioritize things and focusing on what needs to be done. Something that took me a while to learn. But it struck me too that the words discipline and the word disciple are connected. One is about acting toward another, and it takes on three forms: "preventive, supportive, or corrective behavior." And on the other end of the meeting, disciple means student and learner and

pupil. A disciple is someone who learns from another. I think by learning from a teacher or an experience, we can gain and learn about self-discipline and that not doing whatever we want whenever we want may be the most disciplined way to go and in turns this offers us that different kind of freedom.<sup>1</sup>

Not long ago, I heard this story about a young man named Ryan. He was talking about his life and the radical changes that occurred because of both kinds of discipline: learning from others and learning how to be self-disciplined. Ryan shared that he grew up next door to a crack house, and he lived with his mother and brother. His mother was violent and unpredictable, and he became violent too. By the age of 12, he had a rap sheet. When he began his third-grade year, he threatened his teacher by throwing his desk at her. Now, a normal response would've been to send him to the office, but this 5' 1" teacher didn't. She told him when he could learn to behave, she would give him his desk back, but for now, he would sit on the floor. So the interviewer said, "How did Mrs. Hughes figure you for somebody with a future?" And he said, "I don't think that was it I think that's just who she was. She felt that way about every one of her students. Instead of throwing down the hammer and judging me, she asked, "Is everything okay at home? Why are you so angry?" And during that year with Ms. Hughes, school became a safe heaven for me.

But the fights at home continued, and a couple of years later, Ryan pulled a knife on his mother and brother. The police came, and they didn't think it was safe for him to be there, so they took him to juvenile detention in shackles and handcuffs. And he said, "I remembered feeling so alone as I was locked up. The only sound in the days I had that came through those walls was Ms. Hughes' voice because she found out where I was, and she called me, and she said, 'Don't let this moment define you. This doesn't define you. You can do better. I know you can do better.'" He said though, "Afterwards, I felt so ashamed and angry for letting her down that I had one of my biggest outbursts and ended up in solitary confinement. I just banged on the door and screamed and looked for anyone from the outside world to connect to. Being in that cell was the lowest point of my life."

But luckily, for Ryan, someone listened to him, a caseworker by the name of Priscilla Pineiro-Jenkins. She said it wasn't easy at first. He was angry and full of hate and every other word was foul or negative, and there was nothing positive coming from him. But I knew it wasn't directed at me. And I knew I just couldn't say no to someone and shut them out when they were desperate to figure out who will love me and what is love. Who will care for me, and will you stay by me even if I'm cursing you out? He was just a child. He had to know that someone cared and that someone was listening.

Ryan said, "Yeah. I called her awful names. And I remember too that in spite of all my anger and outbursts, she was still nice to me and showed me kindness. It was amazing to feel that light in my darkness." And as I watched as they shared his story, he was sitting next to Priscilla, the caseworker, that many years later. Her small hand on top of his huge one sitting side by side. Like Ms. Hughes, she disciplined him, and she loved him. I think she loved him with the kind of love that Paul talks about in Galatians, *agape*. Ryan learned from her just like he learned from his third-grade teacher. It was the compassionate adults in his life that helped him turn his life around-- Ms. Hughes, Priscilla, and a psychiatrist from the state.

So after detention, he got a fresh start. He and his family moved to a new town with a new school and new friends. And he soon realized that all of the other students were involved in after-school activities, and he became involved too. He said, "I was so busy. I had no time to argue with my mother because I was studying for a Latin quiz or I was at football practice. Then my football coach suggested choir because he thought it would be an easy class. It wasn't an easy class, but it changed my life because music came in. And that's when Ryan found his voice, literally and emotionally, and sang his way into a school for the arts. That led to a trip to Metropolitan Opera House in New York, and he saw opera for the first time and was so thrilled to see someone who looked like him. A woman of color singing the main role. Now he knew what he wanted to do with his life. He said to his voice teacher, "I want to sing at the Metropolitan Opera." And Mr. Brown didn't say, "No, you can't do that," or, "Don't reach so high." Instead, he told me all the things I would need to do. Graduate from high school, go to college, learn foreign languages.

Ryan did just that. He got his BA and his master's, and he learned other languages and at the age of 24, he beat out 1,000 other contestants in a Metropolitan Opera competition for young singers. This is how he became to be known as Ryan Speedo Green, the world-renowned opera singer who was interviewed on 60 Minutes by Scott Pelley. It was hard to believe that this gentle, kind, calm man was the one who had a rap sheet at 12. Today he's newly married and has a young son. His mother got help, and they reconciled. And now he sings opera all around the world. Ryan found his voice for love and singing and hope and for his future because of others. His life changed because of those who listened to him when he was lost. They helped him to find a way out. They offered him hope.<sup>2</sup>

Ryan's story deeply touched me, and it also haunted me because too many children struggle in this world with a difficult start. But his story taught me about the power of compassion and the agape. *Agape* love frees one from judgmental discipline not using words like, "I told you so," or, "Who do you think you are?" They disciplined him into believing in himself. Their kindness, their sense of compassion, the love that was shown even when they were being attacked and challenged exemplified agape. "The kind of love that keeps on loving even when the loved one is unresponsive, unlovable, and unworthy. It is grounded in a consuming passion for the well-being of others."<sup>3</sup>

When I heard Ryan's story, I felt like I was hearing echoes of the story of Paul. And I saw Paul's story in a new way, a different perspective. Before he became the evangelist, he was a person of anger and violence, not because of his faith but because of his attitude. He was a person full of zeal in whatever he did. He felt his calling in those early years of the church or before the church, actually, that his calling was to persecute those talking about Jesus, to punish those he perceived as attacking his faith. And he voiced anger and antagonism and judgment.

Ryan's story made me think about Paul and what he went through. On the day of his transformation, lights flashed, the earth shook, and everything changed. A voice spoke to him. A voice that called him by name. The voice of Jesus disciplining him not with anger but with a simple question, "Why do you persecute me?" Ananias was sent by Jesus to help him. And as I've said before, Ananias was not so sure about this because Paul had a reputation. Like Ryan, Paul had a rap sheet of all his own. Ananias became a kind of caseworker like Priscilla and reached into Paul's darkness and helped him find the light again. A light that transformed him with love in that vision and because of those who helped him afterwards. Paul may not have been able to see with his eyes at first, but he began seeing with his heart. So in this morning's version, Paul is well on his way in his missionary journey, and he's writer to the people in Galatia because he's learned that two factions have formed and were at odds with one another. On one side were those who would come out of Paul's tradition concerned about the need for circumcision and following the lawfully in order to follow Jesus. And on the other side, they were the Gentiles who had worshipped local idols and had no faith tradition like the Jews had had. And Paul understood that for those new to the faith of one God, they had no history like that. They didn't have rituals like that. This was all new to them.

Paul encourages them not to pit themselves against one another but to become free from rigid judgment and to live with love. Paul said, "For freedom, Christ has set us free." The whole law is summed up, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. If, however, you bite and devour one another, you will be difficult." But he says, "If you live by the spirit, the fruit of the spirit is love and joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." For Paul, if love reigns, *agape* can be a source of community and healing and understanding. "*Agape* is not kindled by the merits of worth, but it originates in God for God is love, and it delights in giving. It's a consuming passion for the well-being of others."<sup>4</sup> The kind of love that can transform people and communities. The kind of love that can bring them together instead of pulling them apart.

Ryan was healed by the gift of agape love, and Paul was too. Sometimes some of us are in the darkness and need someone to provide the light. Others of us can be sources of healing and hope if we open our hearts and our minds to care for others. And the truth is that sometimes in our life we've been both. We are called to love because we are loved, because God first loved us. We are called to love not just for our own gain but in service and compassion towards others. We are a people called to choose life, to choose love, to choose the light. People can change. We can help others find their way. May we receive and offer light and love and gratitude to God. Amen.

- 1 From the webpage <https://studentbehaviourmanagement.wordpress.com/preventative-supportive-or-corrective-discipline/> Preventative, Supportive or Corrective Discipline? C.M Charles classifies classroom strategies into three different categories; preventative, supportive or corrective.
- 2 "Ryan Speedo Green: From juvenile delinquency to opera stardom" from written text of oral Interview with Scott Pelley on CBS News program 60 Minutes, June 16, 2019.
- 3 From webpage <http://www.healingis4everyone.com/blog1/category/god-is-love>
- 4 From web page [www.mcleanbible.org/sites](http://www.mcleanbible.org/sites) on the Four kinds of love in Greek, from Precepts Ministries International