

SUN SEPT 24  
9AM & 11AM

Tattoos and the Most  
Important Word

in the Bible



FALL 2023 SERMON SERIES

ENERGY

INTELLIGENCE

IMAGINATION

LOVE

Sunday, September 24, 2023

LOVE - "Tattoos and the Most Important Word in the Bible"

Charlie Berthoud | Exodus 34:6-7, 1 John 3:1

The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." -Exodus 34.6-7

Let's answer the question right now.

From today's sermon title some of you may be wondering, what is the important word in the Bible?

While there is no purely objective way to answer the question, I would make a strong argument that the answer is the Hebrew word **hesed**, which is often translated as "steadfast love."

חֶסֶד

Sometimes it's also rendered as loving kindness, mercy, faithfulness.

The word hesed appears about 250 times in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, repeatedly as the core attribute of God.

The scripture tells us that God is a god of steadfast love. Hesed.

You heard the word in our short reading today from Exodus 34. Let's take a minute to

review the bigger story of what happens in the book of Exodus:

- In the early chapters, we learn that the people are suffering in slavery. Then God calls Moses to save the people. Moses resists, but God persists.
- Moses goes to Pharaoh, saying “Let my people go.” Eventually after ten plagues and a journey across the sea, escaping Pharaoh’s army, the people are free.
- Once free, they begin the long journey to the Promised Land, and God gives them the ten commandments, on two stone tablets. The first command is you shall have no other gods. The second command is you will not worship idols.
- Then soon after when Moses is on the mountain with God, the people make a golden calf and begin to worship it. Moses gets mad and breaks the two stone tablets with the ten commandments.
- The Bible tells us that God is angry, very angry. Moses intercedes with God, who then makes two new tablets.

So instead of giving up on the people, God gives Moses and the people a second chance, with a second set of stone tables. God gives the tablets to Moses with the words you heard:

“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [hesed] and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

Unfortunately, some people only remember the part about visiting the sins of the parents on three or four generations.

They forget that the steadfast love goes to the thousandth generation.

While sin has consequences that linger, but God’s love is a lot bigger and stronger and longer lasting.

God’s steadfast love endures forever.

We are focused on **LOVE** today because we are in the final week of our four-week series on ENERGY, INTELLIGENCE, IMAGINATION, and LOVE—four building blocks for a

healthy and solid and strong Christian life.

I see these four things as gifts from God that are we can nurture and cultivate for more faithful Christian living.

The inspiration for the series comes from a question that is asked of people being ordained as Elders, Deacons, or Pastors:

"Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?" -Presbyterian Church *Book of Order*, W-4.0404h

But these gifts aren't just for church leaders, they are for everyone.

God's hesed, God's steadfast love is for everyone.

About 12 years ago, I came to new appreciation for the significance of the word hesed. I was in a Doctor of Ministry class at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA, focused wisdom literature—the biblical books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. The professor was (and is) a brilliant biblical scholar, and a deeply committed Christian, with emphasis on environmental justice and creation theology in the Old Testament. There were about ten of us in the class, and one of my fellow students is a wonderful Lutheran pastor—a big guy, with a big beard and long hair. He wore lots of black, and had lots of tattoos. One day as we gathered for class, someone asked about his tattoos, so he told us about them with enthusiasm.

Then someone asked the professor if he had any tattoos.

Now this particular professor generally wore a coat and tie, and while I know we can't judge a book by its cover, he just didn't seem like he would have any tattoos. In response to the question, he smiled and said something like "No, I don't. Let's get back to the biblical text."

But a day or two later, as we gathered for class, the professor paused and he said something like, "You know if I were ever going to get a tattoo, I would get the word hesed. We had a good laugh, and I often think about that whenever I come across the word hesed.

So imagine my surprise, after planning this sermon, in finding out that someone in our

congregation has their own hesed tattoo on their ankle. That someone might just be our new Associate Pastor.



I don't plan to get a hesed tattoo any time soon, but I like the image of hesed sinking into our very being, so that we know without a doubt, we are loved by God.

This love that God has for us is meant to be shared.

The little book of 1 John is focused on love. In 1 John 4:11 we read:

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

When God's love sinks in, then we really do start living with more kindness and more love.

We know it's good to be kind. But we also know it's hard.

There is a meme going around which captures our human condition pretty well.



The reason our good intentions of kindness don't also end up in actions is because we forget about God's steadfast love, we forget that we are beloved children of God. Baptism liturgy concludes with 1 John 3:1 which says:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are!

In baptism, we celebrate that we are beloved children of God, celebrating the person being baptized and reminding each other that we are all God's children.

Every Sunday, I try to make sure that somehow we hear the good news that we are beloved children of God.

It's important for us to remind each other and to encourage each other.

Sometimes that reminding and encouraging happens in surprising places.

Philadelphia sports fans have a reputation of being loud and negative. So earlier this summer when high-priced free agent Trea Turner was not playing well, the fans began to boo. And they boo loud in Philly. Remember Philadelphia is where Santa famously got booed. (There's a Wikipedia page about that!)

So, baseball player Trea Turner was in a really bad slump. Fans were not happy. Along with not batting well, he had an error that cost the team a game in Miami.

The team was heading back to Philly, and most people expected that the fans were going to boo loudly.

One prominent fan made a suggestion on social media. Instead of booing the floundering \$300 million free agent, he suggested that the Philly fans cheer for him. The word spread like crazy and the next few days, slumping Trea Turner got a standing ovation every time he came up to bat.

In that three-game series, against Kansas City, Turner went 4 for 12 with two doubles, a home run and five RBIs, and he's been playing much better since. Fans even started donating to his favorite charity and then Turner paid for billboards around Philadelphia to thank the fans for his support.

I'm not a Phillies fan, but I love that story.

I believe that God is cheering for us each and every day. God is cheering for us to be filled with love. The good news of the gospel is that we are beloved children of God.

Last year we had a sermon series on sex and sexuality, recognizing the complex issues and the struggles that we have with sex and sexuality.

On the sixth and final sermon of the series, we gave out stickers that said "You are loved" with the hope that everyone would come to know deep down that we all are beloved children of God, regardless of anything related to sex or sexuality.



The message is still true today.

Life is hard and there are a lot of things that tear us down and make us hurt, but God's hewed, God's steadfast love is with us every day.

God loves us, now and forever.

Of all the building blocks, the most important for us this steadfast and tenacious love of God, the love that will not ever let us go.

In just a minute we're going to sing a verse of the wonderful hymn "O Love That Will Not Let Me Go."

Scottish Pastor George Matheson wrote the song on the eve of his sister's wedding, as he recalled his heartbreak from years prior. George had been engaged, but then he started going blind, and his fiancée broke off their engagement, not wanting to marry a blind man. Recalling his challenges and his sadness, he remembered that God's love would never let him go.

I hope you'll carry the tune and the message in your heart this week.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Matheson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Matheson)

I want to close with a prayer that has made the rounds for several years. It not only mentions tattoos, but more importantly it encourages us to remember that because of God's steadfast love and kindness and mercy, we can be loving, kind, merciful.

*Help us remember that the jerk who cut us off in traffic last night is a single mother who worked nine hours that day and was rushing home to cook dinner, help with homework, do the laundry and spend a few precious moments with her children.*

*Help us to remember that the pierced, tattooed, disinterested young man who can't make change correctly is a worried 19-year-old college student, balancing his apprehension over final exams with his fear of not getting his student loans for next semester.*

*Remind us, Lord, that the scary looking bum, begging for money in the same spot every day (who really ought to get a job!) is a slave to addictions that we can only imagine in our worst nightmares.*

*Help us to remember that the old couple walking annoyingly slow through the store aisles and blocking our shopping progress are savoring this moment, knowing that, based on the biopsy report she got back last week, this will be the last year that they go shopping together.*

*Heavenly Father, remind us each day that, of all the gifts you give us, the greatest gift is love. It is not enough to share that love with those we hold dear. Open our hearts not just to those who are close to us, but to all humanity. Let us be slow to judge and quick to forgive, show patience, empathy and love. Amen.*