

Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Yes, Jesus loves me.

Isn't that a wonderful hymn? A heartfelt THANK YOU to the Starrs for leading us in that hymn.

So good to sing it together...young and old. I don't think we ever outgrow needing to hear those words every once in a while. To be reminded, to remember...Jesus loves me. Jesus love us. Jesus loves all.

Keeping it simple today. And yet, those are some of the best, most important words in life. Jesus loves me.

In fact, shortly we will be sharing Communion together. Nice coincidence, in talking about Jesus' love for us. We will be sharing tangible, personal, and concrete expressions of Jesus' love poured out for each one of us.

In the cup and the bread; his body broken and his blood poured out. **“For God so loved the world that he gave us his one and only Son...”** Yes, Jesus loves me.

But before we get too far into Jesus love ME. I want to thank Jean for her introduction. We needed to pause and celebrate the outworking of God's grace.

And I NEED to acknowledge...it's been a long wait, long journey. Waiting a long time to be standing here TOGETHER, right? Hello! It is so good to be here with you. Yes!

We are at the beginning of our journey together, we begin a season of getting to know one another. You will want to know what kind of pastor I am. How I will listen and lead. How I will love you. What I will focus on in the next 30, 60 and 90 days.

As a pastor, your pastor, I come affirming the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He is the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, who came in the flesh, died on the cross and three days later rose bodily from the dead.

Providing a way for us to experience abundant life this side of heaven...being forgiven, cleansed, fully reconciled in our relationship with God.

Later Jesus ascended and is seated at the right hand of the Father, and one day will return victorious to reign.

Until that day, Jesus is Head of the Church, we are to gather to worship and affirm God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit,

...leaning into discipleship, seeking spiritual maturity, join Jesus in working for the Kingdom to come to earth just as it is in heaven, and share this love God has for us with all.

I am that kind of pastor.

So, I can't think of a better way to start than to acknowledge Jesus's love for me and you and all.

"Jesus Loves Me" is an easy song to sing. It is easy to say. But it isn't always such an easy journey. Not always easy to know Jesus loves us personally.

Personally, I didn't grow up in a Christian home. Didn't even hear this song until I was an adult. As a kid, I did have a tremendous hunger for God. A bit of a mystery.

I didn't have anyone prompting me or guiding me. Just an unexplained hunger that now looking back on it...I can see it was God pursuing me.

In first or second grade, maybe younger, I pestered my mom to teach me how to pray and I learned, "**Now I lay me down to sleep**". A bit later I asked her if there was more I could pray and learned the "**Lord's Prayer**".

In grade school, I asked her for a Children's Bible (this book here). I asked my mom to read family devotions to me at night. I even asked if we could go to church as a family. But that didn't happen.

I didn't see it at the time or understand it, this hunger for God was God pursuing me. Jesus wanted to share his love for ME. For me to understand and receive it and receive Jesus. But it just didn't happen.

Can I just say, so very happy we have programming for kids. We want to help them connect the dots and understand Jesus loves them as early as possible! Right? Amen!

I remember two things in 8th grade and God's pursuit of me.

First, I remember correcting one of my friends during study hall. She complained, "**Ugh...I have to go to Confirmation like every Wednesday!**" And I held up my hand, stopping her, and said, "**You GET to go to Confirmation.**"

I was so jealous she got to go to Confirmation. And now as part of God's sense of humor, I will be in Confirmation this fall!

And the second thing, I asked for a grown-up Bible for Christmas that year. It's what I really wanted. I began in Genesis, cuz that's how you read a book, from the beginning. And I read it until I got bogged down in Leviticus...dead stop.

After I got bogged down, I remember I cheated. I cheated. I skipped over weird Old Testament stuff to get to the New Testament stuff.

And I just happened...I just happened to open to the part where Jesus was calling his disciples to follow him. And I wondered to myself in a confused and tired voice, **“Will Jesus ever call me?”**

As I fell asleep pondering that, my Bible fell behind my bed and I forgot about God for the next three years.

Again, I couldn't see it at the time, but God was reaching out, trying to help me connect the dots on his love for ME. But it wasn't working, again it didn't happen.

Again, could have used some help to see that yes, Jesus loved me. But it just didn't click or sink in.

Until...

It was in the summer between my junior and senior year in high school. God came to me looking and sounding a lot like my friend Ann Jensen.

Ann invited me to go to bible camp with her, for a WHOLE week, for FREE! Honestly, I would have gone anywhere for a week for free. But I wanted to go. And God was pursuing me.

It finally clicked. One night that week, around a campfire, I was listening to my fellow teenagers. They shared story after story of how God had been at work in their lives that past year. It sounded like they knew God.

Hey, what/wait a minute! They sounded like they knew God personally? Up to that point, I kind of believed in God in a vague sense.

But I was beginning to see there was a BIG difference between kind of believing God exists...in a general or vague kind of way VERSUS knowing God, personally, specifically, daily like these kids were talking about experiencing.

That night God helped connect all the dots. Ding ding ding. The light bulb came on.

God the Father was real, God the Son - Jesus was real, God the Holy Spirit was real. And Jesus loved ME?

Jesus loves ME! Jesus love me this I know for the Bible tells me so.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

As this point, as I was preparing the sermon for today, a question began niggling around up there. I tried to ignore it, swat it...GO AWAY! But the question persisted.

At this point, one might begin to wonder, maybe you are wondering. We might wonder, **“How do we know we’ve**

gotten that love? How do we know we have received Jesus' love for us personally?"

Talking about God can raise questions, talking about spiritual things is not easy. And that is okay.

These are important questions to answer but they are not new questions. In fact, the Apostle John wrote about his own experience of meeting Jesus, following him, his death and resurrection.

John wrote about these things to help encourage us and give us assurance.

In short John said, we can know we have been touched by the love of God and we can know we have a personal relationship with Jesus because there is always proof.

Proof is in the pudding. Did you grow up with that phrase? And here's the pudding.

John said we would know we have received Jesus' love, we would know Jesus loves us BECAUSE... we would love God and we would love others. He kept it pretty simple.

And that love would not simply be sentiment or only a fleeting feeling; it would be conviction followed through with action. Actions that make an invisible God seen and visible to others.

Before I even set one foot on these premises, I encountered your love for God. It was palpable, it was real, it was a breath of fresh air. Your kindness and love expressed to me...still causes me to look to God in awe.

Thank you for the cards and meals and the well wishes and the excitement. And the prayers...I have felt your prayers at difficult moments of upheaval.

So grateful to the staff...to Michelle, to Debbie and Ondrea...their hearts for God, their love for you, their competence and deep desire to serve you.

I can say the love Jesus has for you is real, you have received it, BECAUSE your love poured out to me is real.

Before I met a single member of this church, I heard over and over again from my colleagues, this was a good church, a nice church, a kind church. Your reputation preceded you, it always does.

You are a loving church, loving with the love God gives you. Jesus loves you. Yes, Jesus loves you.

As we orient ourselves for our future, this love God has for us – IS for us. But it is not JUST for us. Our faith is not a private thing. It is personal but it is also meant to touch the world, our faith is meant to prompt us to touch our community.

We must join God in loving ALL. We must join God as God pursues all people, to help them connect the dots and have a personal relationship with Jesus.

What does that look like? I look forward to learning what you are up to, listening to your hearts.

TOGETHER we will be listening for where God is at work in our midst and inviting us to step out in faith. TOGETHER, we will celebrate all that is ALREADY happening.

And TOGETHER we will explore new, creative and innovate ways of sharing Jesus loves ME, loves US, and loves ALL. Amen.

In the next few moments, as Laurie plays, I invite you to take a few moments to reflect on Jesus' love for you.

You may want to add...hand over heart, silently, eyes closed.

Jesus loves me. Let his love grow in your hearts. Jesus loves me.

Sit down...song, Jesus Loves Me