INTRODUCTION

Last night Oscar and I drove to Colorado Springs to pick up Steve from the airport. He had been gone for nine days, visiting his mother in western Oregon. It was good for Steve to be there with his mom, celebrating her 87th birthday. Steve and his mom also enjoyed visiting with Steve's two brothers and their wives and children. While he was there, Steve had some quality time with his mom that he doesn't always get when the kids and I have been there too. I'm glad Steve was able to go and be a good and loving son. But I'm also glad he's back home now. I missed him. Rightly so, Steve will always belong to his mother, but for the past 30 years, he's also been mine.

Today's scripture readings express that kind of belonging. In the gospel story that I shared with the children, we heard God's voice at Jesus' baptism. As Jesus comes up out of the water, God says, "You are my Son, whom I love." From the First Letter of John, chapter 4, Alyce read to us about how we are able to love because God first loved us. And, then, in Isaiah 43, we heard God's voice of love for Israel. The people God created and formed were not alone. They belonged to God. I invite you to think about this concept with me this morning. What does it mean when God says, "You are mine"?

1. GOD LOVES EACH OF US

When God says, "You are mine," the first meaning is that God loves each one of us individually. Whether we are tall or short, stocky or slight, God loves us. Whether we have curly or straight hair or no hair at all, God claims us as his own. Isaiah 43:7 says that God
created us for his glory. God formed and made us with divine precision and care, so that we could be God's pride and joy. Verse 4 indicates that we are precious and honored in God's sight.

This intimate involvement with each one of us is affirmed in Psalm 139, which includes these words of praise to God, the creator of each individual human being:

For it was you [O God] who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb . . .
My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret . . .
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

That same Psalm 139 which praises God as the creator of individual babies, also praises God as the one who knows us well and takes a keen interest in us as adult individuals too.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.
Where can I go from your spirit? . . .
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me.

Maybe you've heard the saying, "God loves you, and there's nothing you can do about it."

That's true. God loves you, and you, and you, and you, and you, and even me. And that's the first part of what it means when God says, "You are mine."

2. **GOD LOVES US AS A GROUP**

A second meaning of God's claim upon us is that God loves us as a group. This passage in Isaiah 43 was written to the people of Israel as a nation. God alternately calls them by the nickname Jacob, reminiscent of the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham. The Hebrew people were wandering nomads that God had called from one place to another multiple times. They were oppressed slaves whom God rescued and led into the promised land. They were
hungry people whom God fed. They were lawless and chaotic people to whom God gave commandments stronger than the stone upon which they were chiseled. They were like sheep without a shepherd, and God gave them leadership with King David and the prophets. God's love wasn't for just individuals, but also for the uncountable descendants of Abraham altogether—the whole community, the entire society, the collective hope and dream of what could be done and realized by a people specially called and chosen by God.

Centuries later, in New Testament times, that family or chosen-people-of-God concept was adopted by the early Christians. They too believed that they were loved by God as a group. In First Peter 2:9-10 we read, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God . . . Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God."

Another illustration of God's love for the Christian group comes from the Letter to the Ephesians 5:25,29. There, husbands are instructed to love their wives "just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her," and just as Christ "feeds and cares for" the church.

Today, it's so helpful for us to remember this love God has for the group. I know there are times when we individuals feel down and blue. We doubt our faith and feel like a hypocrite. Problems overwhelm us and we wonder if God even loves us anymore. After what we've done, how could God love us? At times like that it's tempting to stay home and isolate ourselves from the church. But that's exactly the time when we most need to be with God's people. In the midst of Christ's body, in the group that is loved by God, our faith can be restored. In the midst of the people whom God loves, we can be healed and redeemed. Our confidence in God's love for our own individual selves will grow by leaps and bounds when we embrace the love God has for the group we call the church.
3. **GOD LOVES ALL OF US**

So, we can be confident that God loves us individually and within the group God has called. That assurance of love is wonderful. It enhances our life and brings us great joy. But our sense of God's love needs to go one step farther. When we hear God say, "You are mine," we need to realize that God loves all of us. Not just us as individuals. Not just our group. But God loves all the children of the whole world.

In Isaiah 43:5-7, we hear God's voice saying, "I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth--everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." In verse 9, God calls "all the nations to gather together" to witness to the truth of God's salvation and love.

When we American Christians think of folks of other religions and countries, we sometimes feel afraid. They're different from us. They have different stories and sometimes different values. They speak different languages and sometimes wear different clothes. They eat different food and have different holy days. Because we don't know much about them, they are mysterious, and therefore seem dangerous. But, in Isaiah 43:5, God tells us, "Don't be afraid, for I am with you." God indicates that the bringing together of people from far and wide is all part of God's plan of love.

This week I read a review of a new book titled *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?* In that book, author Brian McLaren "notes that there have been two well-attested strategies for [Christian] religious formation." In one, "we mark the strength of our Christian commitment by the intensity of our opposition to" other religions. We shore up our own faith in clear and hostile contrast to those others. Or, if that us-versus-them mentality is
distasteful to us, we might take on a second perspective. We might increase our tolerance toward those of other faiths by "adopting a weak religious identity" for ourselves. In other words, it doesn't matter so much to us what other people believe because it doesn't matter so much to us what we believe. The author of the book didn't care for either of those common approaches. He suggested that there might be "a third option: [to hold] a strong Christian identity that is also generous and open toward the other." In other words, we could believe without any question that God's love has come to us through Jesus Christ and the Christian gospel, but we would also believe that God's love is available to Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and others who come to God on a different path. God calls his children in the north, south, east, and west--from the ends of the earth--because God loves all of us.

**CONCLUSION**

You may have missed it, but Friday, January 11th, was Human Trafficking Awareness Day. That's a day set aside to help us learn about the horrible realities of slavery that still exist even today and even in our country. Often that slavery is connected to the sex trade--in which teenage girls are exploited and abused.

Pastor Rudy Rasmus of St. John's United Methodist Church in Houston was recently speaking on this subject. He has personal knowledge because his father and he once operated a motel that catered to prostitution. Rudy says he was callous to the human pain around him--so callous, in fact, that he continued working in that business for five years after his wife got him started attending a United Methodist church. But Rudy says something transformative was happening during those five years. As Rudy tells it in his own words:

During those five years, there were people in that church who would say, “Rudy, we love you.” And I’d reply, “Yeah. Right.” My daddy told me [not to trust] people like them . . . But I’d show up every week, and these people kept telling
me they loved me . . . One day, five years later, I believed it . . . In spite of [all I'd done], Jesus said, “You can come be a part of my crowd.” And that unconditional love God showed me is why I’m so committed to this faith today.

When God says, "You are mine," we can trust that God's love is real for individuals, for groups, and for the whole world.