

For God So Loved The World

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the East Kishacoquillas Presbyterian Church, Reedsville, PA on August 24, 1986. Scripture Lessons: 2 Chronicles 36:14-23, John 3:14-16.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Have you ever wondered if God loves you? You're a rare bird if you haven't. Years after he started the Reformation Martin Luther was sitting around the dinner table with some friends and he said, "My temptation is this, that I think I don't have a gracious God." I have a hunch that deep down many of us feel that way about God. Many people feel that God has it in for them. A lot of people never show much interest in God because deep down in their hearts they have doubts about God's love.

There are many reasons why people doubt God's love. *There's the fact of suffering.* Elie Wiesel is a Hungarian Jew who was deported with his family to Auschwitz when he was still a boy, and then to Buchenwald where his parents and a younger sister died. In his memoirs of those experiences there's one heart-wrenching passage where he tells how he lost his faith in a loving God. He writes,

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night. Never shall I forget the smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust.

When we look at the world it certainly doesn't give us much confidence in a loving God. How can there be an all powerful loving God when six million Jews marched like lambs to the slaughter into the crematoriums of Germany? How could a loving God let the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians be snuffed out in a moment at Hiroshima and Nagasaki? How can God love the world when millions are starving in Ethiopia and the Sudan? How could a loving, all powerful God allow this? In the light of natural

catastrophes and human atrocities so many people can't believe that a Father's love is behind the universe. But when Christians point to the love of God it's not to the world that we look.

A person's world view may prevent belief in a loving God. It's very difficult for people raised in a scientific culture to see God at all. Many highly educated, scientifically oriented people find it extremely hard to believe that anything is real which isn't connected in some way to physical matter. There's no way scientifically that you bring God into a laboratory and experiment on him. There's no litmus test to prove God's presence. If someone could prove statistically that Christians who pray receive more verifiable answers than non-Christians that might be evidence. Or if God would just rearrange the stars some summer evening and make them blink on and off with the message *God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life*, that might pass for scientific proof for God's existence and love.

But many people look at the skies and don't see God at all even though they'd like to. In Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial* a man's charged with a crime. He's handed a summons to appear before the judge. But there are several problems. He has no idea what crime he committed. He doesn't know who the judge is and every attempt to find the judge ends in a blind alley. He's constantly reminded that his trial is coming up but a date is never set. People tell him that no one has ever yet been found innocent. He goes through life with this anxiety of judgment hanging over his head. Finally, several thugs commissioned by the judge drag him out of his home and knife him to death. The closing lines of the book show him flat on his back looking past his attackers into the sky, as if for an answer. His attackers are just at the point of plunging a knife into his chest when the

victim sees in the distance a human figure, faint and insubstantial, looking out the window of a high building. The person leans out the window as if to observe more carefully. But whoever it is, they do nothing. Kafka gives the impression that it's God looking down indifferently from heaven?

Throughout this disturbing novel Kafka describes the plight of so many 20th century men and women. They feel vaguely guilty and anxious but don't know where to find a merciful God. God, if he exists at all, seems silent and passive. Their materialistic world view won't permit them to see a loving Father behind the universe. The universe is cold and indifferent.

Some people doubt God's love because of what they've been taught about God. I can remember growing up with a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward God. I was taught that God is love and that the vast majority of human-kind will spend eternity in hell. I was taught that God loved me very much and would send me to hell on the slightest pretext because even the slightest sin offended his holiness so much that it merited hell. It made no difference whether I forgot to say my prayers or went out and murdered somebody. Both were equally heinous in God's eyes and deserved eternal torment. I was told that God loves me and if I didn't trust in his Son he would torture me forever. It's very hard to trust someone who makes those kinds of threats. It's very hard to believe that someone who makes those kind of threats really loves me.

For awhile as a child I lived in terrible anxiety that God hadn't chosen me for salvation and no matter what I did God wouldn't permit me to believe. I pictured God as playing dice with the universe and capriciously choosing those who were to be saved and damned. I pictured a God who in his sovereignty chose to torture some forever in hell and others to enjoy

eternal life. Now you have to *fear* that kind of God but it's very difficult to believe that such a god has the loving heart of a Father. I realise now that all that was a distorted kind of Calvinism gone cultic. It was a sick religion and a distortion of biblical Christianity. And it's precisely that kind of religion that keeps many people from believing in God's love for the world.

Then again, some of us doubt God's love because we experience so little of human love. I remember as a child being shown a little battered puppy who'd been mistreated by its owner. The puppy distrusted everyone who came near it. I felt sorry for it and wanted to pet it but when I drew closer he snarled at me and snapped. That's the way we often react to God. We've been bruised and battered by life many times and when God reaches out to us we snarl and snap at him. Life gives some people a raw deal; a loved one dies, our parents get divorced, we lose our health suddenly, our engagement is broken along with our heart and so many promises.

Sometimes it's religious people who hurt us. They say they love us but their answers often seem so glib. They simply don't seem capable of understanding. They repulse us with their self-righteousness. They seem to judge and condemn us. We wonder if God's love is like theirs. And as a result we lunge out at God when he draws near to us. We think he must be coming to torture us forever. Each one of us knows that there are areas of our lives that we're ashamed of and for which we condemn ourselves. If we condemn ourselves and if religious people condemn us, certainly God will condemn and judge us all the more severely we think. So because of our experience with the fickleness of human love we begin to doubt God's love.

Finally, some of us doubt God's love because we think he loves only good people. We think he loves only evangelical, Bible-believing, born-again Christians. We doubt that he loves worldly people like us. We doubt that he loves unbelieving people and doubters. He loves the heterosexual but not the homosexual. He loves the happily married but not the divorced. He loves the conservative but not the liberal. He loves America but hates that evil empire Russia. Don't we all sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that God loves religious people more than non-religious people? That he loves good people but not bad?

That's something a lot of Jews in the days of Jesus believed. They knew God loved Israel. But it was shocking to hear Jesus say that God loved the world. The world with its idolatry, perverted sexuality, and gross ignorance about God—was under God's wrath and curse. And it was scandalous the way Jesus made friends with the worldly and the unchurched of his day. He didn't chose spiritual people to be apostles and disciples. He chose unspiritual, unreligious, unchurched people, people like Matthew the tax-collector, Simon the revolutionary, Thomas the doubter, Peter the denier, and Mary Magdalene who had the reputation of being a prostitute. That's the way God's love is. He loves the lost, the wandering, the violent, the sinful and those who seem to have so little value.

Jesus once told three short stories illustrating this. He said God is like a waiting father who runs out to meet his prodigal son returning home in shame from the pig pen. God is like a shepherd who leaves the 99 good sheep and goes out looking for the one wandering sheep who's in danger of perishing. God is like a woman who sweeps her house in search of one small lost coin and when she finds it she's so happy she throws a big party and spends far more on the celebration than the lost coin is worth. Only

when we begin to see God like this are we able to trust him. Only when we begin to see God like this do we begin to realize how much he loves the world.

How then can we believe God loves the world? Certainly not by looking at human history ~~with its Hiroshimas and Dresden fire bombings nor through looking at nature *red in tooth and claw*~~. Certainly God's love can't be verified in a laboratory nor through the fickle love we so often experience from others. Certainly his love can't be experienced by contemplating God's eternal decrees or his absolute power.

Where then do we see God's love for the world? We see it above all in Jesus of Nazareth. In his parables and preaching. In the way he related to all sorts of sinful people. And above all we see God's love for the world on the cross.

G.A. Studdert Kennedy said it this way in a line from one of his poems,

Only in Him can I find home to hide me,
Who on the Cross was slain to rise again;

The God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son is the God whose son prayed on a cross for his crucifiers, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do". That's what has persuaded me of God's love as no theological argument could ever do. Pushing my way through the maze and mystery of life I come to the cross of Christ and I hear God saying, "You can do with me what you like. You can break my bones and bruise my flesh and drain my blood, but you can't stop me from being what I am-- the Father who loves you and will not let you go."

The late D.T. Niles of Ceylon, one of the past presidents of the World Council of Churches once repeated this true story which he originally heard from a French Roman Catholic bishop. Three university students of

Paris were walking along the road one Good Friday afternoon. They noticed crowds of people going to the churches to confess their sins so they could receive Holy Communion on Holy Saturday. The students began to discuss this custom of the "unenlightened," and talked in cynical terms about the survival of religion which they described as superstition. Suddenly two of the students turned to the third, who was the leader among them, and said to him, "Will you go into this church and tell the priest there what we've been saying to each other? I dare you!" "Sure, I will," he said, and went in. He stood in line with those who were going to confess their sins and when his turn came he looked at the priest and said, "Father, I've come here merely to tell you that Christianity is a dying institution and that religion is superstition." The priest looked at the young man keenly and said, "Why did you come here, son, to tell me this?" And the student told him of his conversation with his friends. The priest listened carefully and then said: "All right, I want you to do one thing for me before you go. You accepted the dare of your friends and came here; now accept my dare to you. Walk up to the chancel and you'll find there a large wooden cross and on it the figure of Jesus crucified. I want you to stand before that cross and say these words: 'Jesus died for me and I don't care a damn.'" The student felt a bit disgusted but he agreed to accept the dare. He went up and stood jauntily before that cross with a cynical smile on his face and spit out the words: "Jesus died for me and I don't care a damn." He quickly came back to the priest and said, "Well, I did it." "Do it once more," said the priest; "after all it means nothing to you." The student went back and looked at the cross for some time and the figure on it, and then he stammered it out: "Jesus died for me and I don't care a damn." He returned to the priest and, appearing to be a bit shaken, said, "I've done it; I'm going now." The priest

placed his hand on the young man's shoulders firmly yet gently and said, "Once more; just once more and you can go." The student walked up to the chancel and looked at that cross again, and at the Crucified. He stood there for a long time. He was strangely drawn to this innocent victim of our inhumanity lifted up on the cross. He began to see the Crucified's solidarity with all the oppressed and downtrodden of the world. He began to see the Crucified's solidarity with him. Those outstretched arms seem to reach out to embrace him and all the world. Finally the student came back to the priest and said, "Father, I want to confess my sins now?" The story's true. The French bishop who originally told D.T. Niles the story was that young student.

He's like a persecuted wounded lover ...

On the cross we see how desperately God loves us. The heavenly Father loves us so desperately that he won't stop loving us even though we don't care a damn and refuse to be loved him him. No barrier of indifference, pride or unbelief, nothing in our intellect, our emotions, or our conduct, nothing we can think or say or do can separate us from God's love made visible and actual in the cross of Jesus Christ. He's the Hound of Heaven who pursues us even down to hell. On the cross we see a God whom we can trust because we know how desperately he loves us. We can believe him. We can trust him. We can stake our lives on the truth of his love.

Let us pray :

My God, I love thee; not because
I hope for heaven thereby,
Nor yet for fear that loving not
I might for ever die;

But for that thou didst all mankind
Upon the cross embrace;
For us didst bear the nails and spear,
And manifold disgrace,

And griefs and torments numberless,
And sweat of agony;
Even death itself; and all for us
Who were thine enemy.

Then why, most loving Jesus Christ,
Should I not love thee well,
Not for the sake of winning heaven,
Nor any fear of hell;

Not with the hope of gaining aught,
Nor seeking a reward;
But as thyself has loved me,
O ever-loving Lord!

Even so I love thee, and will love,
And in thy praise will sing,
Solely because thou art my God
And my eternal King.
Amen.