

## Learning to Love God

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on March 2, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 6:4-5; 1 John 4:19-21; John 21:15-17.

Kay's sister Ann just recently got married. Over the years that I've known her she dated a number of really nice Christian men but she could never really decide if she were in love. "How can I know I really love this guy?" she would ask me. "I don't hear bells ringing. I don't hear thunder. Don't bells ring when you're really in love?" I've tried to tell her that it's nice to hear bells every once in a while but if I heard bells ringing all the time I'd have a terrible headache.

The same is true when it comes to our love for God. Sometimes a Christian wonders, "Do I really love God? I don't hear bells ringing. I don't hear thunder. I've never had a dramatic religious experience. Surely I would if I really love God." We think if we really love God a flood of warm feeling will flow over us and we'll swoon with love for God. And the amazing thing is that this sometimes happens. Millions of people testify to this experiential dimension of the Christian life which is so often missing: But our love for God doesn't depend on these extraordinary experiences. <sup>if ~~they~~ they were constant we would be immobilized for service by religious ecstasy.</sup> I really love Kay but I don't hear bells ringing all the time.

And I really love God even though I don't always hear bells ringing or feel a warm flood of feeling when I pray and worship. <sup>I'm fact the real test of whether I love God is if I'm willing to worship or obey him when I feel none of this.</sup>

Yet everyone who is a growing Christian wants to love God more. How can we love God more? Some people, in their desire to love God more, constantly seek for mystical spiritual experiences during which they'll become immersed in an ocean of love for Christ? Others go to the other extreme. They fear love as an experience and as an emotion. For them love for God is <sup>primarily</sup> ~~nothing more than~~ a duty to be performed apart from any feelings? <sup>this is probably the predominant feeling among Presbyterians -</sup> So often a church becomes polarised around these two extremes.

Emphasize Ann's question to question of love for God.

Polanyi: love as a feeling; love as a duty.

You have some Christians who are very experience oriented. Their love for God is something that they feel and experience and want others to feel and experience.<sup>we need more of this in the Presbyterian church.</sup> On the other hand you have other Christians who feel very uncomfortable about the experiential dimensions of the Christian faith.

Their love for God is expressed in action; feeding the poor, clothing the hungry, visiting the shut-ins.<sup>we need this too so that our love for God doesn't degenerate into private pieties,</sup> But wouldn't it be great if our love for God could include both these dimensions; where we'd experience our love for God in deep feelings and express that love in action in the world?

Love for God is both a duty and an experience. You love your mother, or you love your husband, and it's your duty to love them. But hopefully love goes beyond mere duty. You love because of the natural impulse within your heart which moves you to love. In the same way, we have a duty to love God as our heavenly Father and to love Christ as our Savior; but love for God is so much more than a mere matter of duty. It's my duty to love Kay but I also love Kay because I can't help loving her. Do you remember that old Pearl Bailey number, "I just can't help loving my man"? Our love for God is like that. We love God because we can't help loving. The gratitude in our hearts is so great that we can't help loving the Lord who has done so much for us. So if we want to love God more, if we want to feel that love for him we'll go to the cross and let ourselves be loved by Christ. The Apostle John tells us that "we love because he first loved us."

Think of the sun and the earth. The sun is this immense ball of fire that warms the whole solar system. It has light and warmth in itself. Whatever warmth the planets have is derived from the sun. Whatever light the planets have it's reflected light from the sun. When the sun shines on the earth, the earth begins to warm up. As the daylight hours increase and the sun shines longer on the earth the days get warmer. The side of the

moon that faces the sun is bright and intensely hot. The dark side of the moon is unimaginably cold.

The same is true of our love for God. Whatever love we feel for others, for ourselves, or for God reflects God's love for us to some degree. And as we turn our face to God in Christ, and let the light and love and warmth of his face shine on us we begin to feel that warmth of love and reflect it in our lives even as the light of the sun is reflected by the earth and moon. Like a cold stone that slowly warms up throughout the day as the sun shines on it, so our hearts warm up with love for God as we turn our face to Christ and allow ourselves to be loved by him.

Helmut Thielicke is a well known German pastor. He tells a beautiful story in one of his books which I think is a beautiful illustration of how our love for God grows as we turn our face to God and allow ourselves to be loved by him. He writes, "I once knew a very old married couple who radiated a tremendous happiness. The wife especially, who was almost unable to move because of old age and illness and in whose kind old face the joys and sufferings of many years had etched a hundred runes, was filled with such gratitude for life that I was touched to the quick. Involuntarily I asked myself what could possibly be the source of this kindly old person's radiance. Otherwise they were very common people and their room indicated only the most modest comfort. But suddenly I knew where it all came from, for I saw these two speaking to each other and their eyes hanging upon each other. All at once it became clear to me that this woman was dearly loved. And it was as if she were like a stone that has been lying in the sun for years and years, absorbing all its radiant warmth, and now was reflecting back cheerfulness and warmth and serenity. Let me express it this way. It wasn't because she was this kind

of a cheerful and pleasant person that she was loved by her husband all those years. It was probably the other way around. Because she was so loved, she became the person I now saw before me."

Christ speaks of the church as the Bride of Christ. Whatever love there is in the heart of His Bride is there because His Bride is His Beloved and because she is so love by him. It isn't because we're so kind and cheerful and pleasant and loving that God loves us. It's the other way around. Because we're so loved, we begin to experience love for Christ.

How do we learn to love God more then? By turning our face to Christ and bathing ourselves in the light of his love. But that leaves us with a final question, "How do we turn our face to Christ? How do we let the sunshine of his love warm our hearts? How do we allow ourselves to be loved by him?"

I can think of a number of ways: By worshipping together every Sunday with God's people, the church, the Bride of Christ we hear about God's love for us in Christ in Word and Sacrament. By setting aside a time each day to read and meditate on the love letters God has given us in the Bible. By obeying God's commands concerning proclaiming the Gospel, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, working for justice we put our love into action and begin to feel greater love for God. All these things, I believe, are absolutely essential if we are to really love God in Christ.

Friends, it may be that some of you have come to church this morning without much love for God in your hearts. Maybe you even harbor a little bit of hostility in your hearts for God. Maybe things haven't gone so well for you in life and you feel like God is letting you down. Maybe you just don't feel anything at all. But I believe that there's something within all of us that will never be satisfied until we begin to love God. And I believe

that there's something within all of us that knows that our love for others will grow as our love for God grows.

The season of lent is a time that we emphasize looking to the suffering and death of Christ for us. He loved us and gave himself for us. He destined us in love to be his sons and daughters. He loved us to death. That love of Jesus Christ for us has never changed. He's never checked his love for us by our ingratitude. He's never stopped loving us because of our forgetfulness. He loves us so that he can't be content even in heaven until he gets us there with him. And he asks us what he asked Simon Peter, "Do you love me?" May we take time now to hear him speak to us and to answer him sincerely, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."

"We love because he first loved us."

Amen