

The God Who Loves in Freedom

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 5th Sunday of Easter, May 1, 1994. Scripture Lessons: Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Someone once asked the great 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, if he could sum up what he had written in his magisterial, twelve volume, Church Dogmatics. Barth, teasing maybe, but still serious, said, "Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so."

I think John, who wrote the words I just read from the Bible, would have agreed with Barth. "God is love," he wrote. Notice that this is a statement. It's not a command. It's a proclamation, not an exhortation. We've come to expect commands from the Church: "Do this! Don't do that!" We've come, perhaps, to expect appeals from the church: "Give more money!" We've come to expect definitive guidance from the church with respect to all sorts of social issues. But the church's first word to us is a statement: "God is love." "In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

What's the first thing we say to those who don't go to church? Do we say, "You really ought to go to church." What do you say to your work mate who takes the Lord's name in vain? Do we say, "I don't appreciate your language." What do we say to the couple who's living together without benefit of marriage? Do we say, "What you're doing is wrong." What's the first thing we say to people who are angry and fighting one another. Do we say, "You really ought to stop your fighting." Or is the first thing we say to all these people, "God is love. God loved us and sent

his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins”?

This is the first word we say to agnostics, people who can't believe or who don't know what they believe. This is the first word we say to those who aren't believers or who believe in some other God than the one who loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. As Christians, we fail in our mission unless we give this news priority over all our appeals, pronouncements, advice and rebukes and definitive guidance.

There are times when there's little else we can say. I read an article about a man who was executed a few weeks ago for murdering a family - I think it was in Texas. And I thought, what if I, as a Christian, were asked to visit and speak to that man on death row before his execution. What would I say to him? I couldn't go and say to him, "You really ought to live a better life. You need to change your lifestyle." Nor could I bring myself to say, "What you did was a terrible and wicked thing. You really deserve to die." But I believe that as a Christian I'd have to find some way of saying the ultimate thing, the central thing, the most important thing that I could possibly say: "God loves you. Christ died for you. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

Our elders and deacons met one Saturday afternoon in January for our annual church officers retreat. We talked all day about our mission as a Church. After studying the Bible, talking and praying all day, we came up with this mission statement: "We are a family of Christians dedicated to proclaiming the

unconditional love and leadership of Jesus Christ to the local and world community.” Some of us objected to the statement because we fall short of actually doing this. We finally adopted it because we all agreed that we’re dedicated to proclaiming God’s unconditional love even if we fail. Maybe if we keep that statement before us we’ll actually become more effective in proclaiming, in word and deed, God’s unconditional love.

This is the first thing we and the whole world need to know. Not that we loved God, but that God loved us and gave us his only son. Before we ever thought of asking for God’s love, God loved us in Christ. Before we even considered choosing Christ and making a decision for him, Christ chose us and made a decision for us. Before we ever thought about opening ourselves up to the freeing, renewing work of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit already has been at work in our life and in the world around us.

As Christians, we accept and live by this good news: God is love. God loves us. Christ died for us.” ~~We believe and accept this, not because we must, but because we may; not because we are, or even want to be, a godly, spiritual person but because God loves, and Christ died for, and the Spirit comes to ungodly, worldly people like you and me.~~ We believe and accept this good news not because God is soft and indulgent in dealing with sin and sinners like us, but because in Jesus Christ, God has already taken on God’s self the consequences of our sins and sins of the whole world. We believe and accept this good news that God loves us not because God will damn and punish us if we don’t; or pay off with all sorts of

good things if we do, but out of sheer thankfulness for the loving and powerful grace of God in Jesus Christ. The good news is that God loves us even in those times when we're not even sure we believe in God or love God, and despite the massive unbelief and disobedience in the world around us (Guthrie).

Doesn't this word from God make us lazy; even self satisfied?" Isn't this, in fact, exactly the kind of word that self-centered American's use to justify our complacency? Why not just sit back and relax and bask self-indulgently in God's love? We should not and we must not do that because God chose us to make visible God's love for the world. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us and God's love becomes real to unbelievers and to ourselves. The love of the invisible God becomes visible in and through and by us.

If the first word the church has to say is "God loves", the second word, then, is "Let us love one another." It's an urgent plea. It's probably a desperate plea reflecting the conflicts that were disturbing the early Christian Church. "Let us love one another!" is John's heartfelt plea. We're able to love one another, John says, because God first loved us.

God's love for us is not only a saving love, it's empowering love. "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him." God's love enables us to live through Christ; enables Christ's love to be lived in us. God's love for us enables us to love our friends and our enemies through Christ.

God's love reconciles sinners to God but it also reconciles us to one another. Protestants and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland ought to love one another. The Nkata party, the ANC and the White people of South Africa ought to love one another. The Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats ought to love one another. Liberals and Conservatives and those in the middle of the road ought to love one another in the church. It's not possible to get right with God without getting right with other human beings. Any one who says I love God and hates his brother or sister is a liar.

God's love is not a love that enables us to live above all the hostility and estrangement and suffering that results from broken human relationships in our own lives and others around us. God's love enables us to confront these broken relationships with a willingness to be reconciled ourselves and then to become agents of reconciliation (Shirley Guthrie).

When we were in Israel we visited a school built by Father Elias Chacour with some of our mission money. Christian and Muslim Arabs learn reading, writing, and arithmetic but they also learn how to love one another and their Jewish brothers and sisters despite the terrible suffering, injustice and oppression that they've experienced. Father Chacour has learned to love those who destroyed his village and confiscated his father's property without any compensation. Having lost everything because of the evils of a racist ideology, Chacour's father gathered his family around him and said, "Children, if someone hurts you, you can curse him. But this would be useless. Instead, you have to ask the Lord to bless the man who makes himself your enemy. And do you know what

will happen? The Lord will bless you with inner peace - and perhaps your enemy will turn from his wickedness." Those are the words of a man who has experienced God's love and who is living through Christ.

But let's come closer to home. Imagine an ordinary home as the husband arrives home from work, and sits down with hardly a word to his wife. First, be the husband and think his thoughts: "Five more people got laid off this week. It could be me next week and then what about the mortgage and the car payments and the vacation we've planned? I know she's sitting there wondering what happened today and what I'm thinking. I wish I could tell her. Why is it that I find it so hard to express my feelings?"

Now change places and think the wife's thoughts. "What's wrong with him. What have I done that he ignores me like this? It's like I'm not even here. Why doesn't he talk to me? Why is it that I'm always the one who has to make the first move? I wish, I wish - but what's the use of wishing? I'm stuck with him."

Sometimes, as Christians, we know that we must, like God, make the first loving move to be reconciled to a spouse, child, parent, friend or enemy. And other times we feel so weak and powerless that we're unable to respond in love to a spouse, child, parent, friend or enemy unless we're first loved by them. In fact, we may find that we oscillate between the roles of being loved and being lover. But whenever we love, we know God, we experience God; the living and loving God lives and loves in us. When we love, we abide in God and God abides in us.

Let us pray: We behold your glory, O God, in the love shown by your Son, lifted up on the cross and exalted on high. Be glorified anew in the love we have for one another as disciples of the risen Lord Jesus, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.