

2-22
Theodore S. Atkinson

John 3:14-21

For God So loved the World.

Have you ever wondered if God loves you? You're a rare bird if you never have. 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. His first book, simply entitled, *Night*, is a memoir of these experiences. There is one heart-wrenching place in that book 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 that 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 is 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 is not connected in some way to physical matter. There doesn't seem to be any empirical evidence for God. 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 would be evidence. Or if God would just rearrange the stars some summer evening and make them blink on and off with the message "God exists and he loves you"; that would be scientific proof for God's existence and love.

Many people look at the skies and don't see God at all even though they would like to. In Franz Kafka's novel, *The Trial*, a man is charged with a crime. He is 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 noone has ever yet been found innocent. He goes through life with this anxiety of judgment hanging over his head. Finally, several thugs drag him out of his home and knife him to death. The closing lines of the book show him flat on his back looking up

at his attackers into the sky, as if for an answer. His attackers are just at the point of plunging a butcher 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 of the window as if to observe more carefully the murder. But whoever it is, he or she does or says nothing. Kafka doesn't tell us who the person is. Is it God looking down indifferently from heaven? Friends, this is the plight of many modern men and women. They feel vaguely guilty and anxious but don't know where to find a gracious God. God, if he exists at all, is silent and passive. Their materialistic world view will not 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 have 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 littlest sin offended his holiness so much that it merited hell. It made no difference whether I simply forgot to say my prayers some morning 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 had not chosen me for salvation and no matter what I did God would not 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 is 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 had been abused and 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 have 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 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 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 of 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 many Jews in the days of Jesus believed. They knew that God loved Israel. But it was quite shocking to hear Jesus say that God loved the world. The world 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 a particularly bad reputation as a sinner. 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 that 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 (yes, 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 that God loves the world? Certainly not by looking at human history with its Hiroshimas and its Dresden fire bombings. Certainly not through looking at nature "red in tooth and claw." Certainly God's love can't be empirically verified in a laboratory anymore than my mother's love for me can be scientifically proven. Certainly his ~~love can't be verified through the love that we experience through others;~~ that love so often fails us. Certainly his love can't be experienced by contemplating God's eternal decrees or his absolute power.

We see God's love for the world in the parables of Jesus and in his deeds of compassion. But above all we see the love of God on the cross.

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 is 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 cannot stop me from being what I am-- the Father who loves you and will not let you go."

Graham Greene's novel, *The heart of the Matter*, portrays an English chief of police in an African colony, a man whose bitter frustration has involved him in a tangled web of intrigue, adultery, and murder. Beside himself with despair, he lunges toward the brink of suicide. Religion has ceased to guide and comfort him, but in a gesture of defiance he goes to the church for the last time, more to curse God than to pray. As he stands before the altar and looks at the crucifix, there breaks upon him, as never before, the amazing awareness of One who clings to him in spite of all that he is and all that he has done. The indignity of it almost disgusts him, and he cries out, "How desperately God must love me!"

God does love us desperately. The heavenly Father loves us so desperately that he will not stop loving us even though we refuse to be loved by 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 is the hound of heaven who pursues 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 heav'n thereby,
Nor yet for fear that loving not
I might for ever die;

John 3:16
about the matter
how... I don't know
down

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;
E'en death itself; and all for man
Who was thine enemy.

Then why, most loving Jesus Christ,
Should I not love thee well,
Not for the sake of winning heav'n,
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!

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