

For God So Loved the World

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Trinity Sunday, May 29, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17.

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

Once I visited a couple who'd started attending church regularly. Both were concerned that they weren't from a Presbyterian background. I said, "Don't worry. Most Presbyterians don't come from a Presbyterian background anymore." Then the wife asked, "What exactly is the main teaching of the Presbyterian church?" I thought for a moment about predestination and the five points of Calvinism but I decided to make it simple and plain. I said the most important teaching in the Presbyterian church is that God loves the world so much that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

We all need love. We need to know that we're loved. Love is a basic need, more basic than food or shelter. More basic than sex. If we're not loved, if we don't experience love on a human level we develop anti-social behavior, we can even get sick and die. *We perish* for lack of love alone.

I can remember an experiment from my high school psychology book that was carried out on two monkeys. One monkey was raised from infancy by its mother. That little monkey grew up surrounded by the love and affection of its mother. She was warm and soft and cuddly. She fed him. She played with him and disciplined him. It grew up to be a healthy and happy monkey. The other monkey was taken away from its mother at birth and raised by a machine that fed it. It never experienced love. It became listless and was subject to far more sickness than the other monkey. Eventually the monkey died, perished, for no apparent reason other than it wasn't loved.

Our need of love is every bit as great as that of monkeys. A child who

grows up in an atmosphere of criticism becomes distrustful and morose, and sometimes anti-social. I remember hearing Leighton Ford tell a remarkable story of the affects of love on one man. (Ford is an associate evangelist with Billy Graham and a Presbyterian minister). In Sioux Falls, South Dakota, (he said) a church began a halfway house where men and women released from prison could live for a nominal rent until they could get jobs. One parolee in his thirties had been in reform school or prison every year since his mid-teens. One day as he sat in the living room of the half-way house, the three year old daughter of the couple who administered the home gave him a hug, just a simple, affectionate hug. Hugs are probably something that most of us experience everyday from loved ones. But hugs were new to this young parolee. With tears rolling down his cheeks, he said, "You know, this is the first time I can remember anybody touching me in love." He'd been beaten; he'd been physically abused again and again but he couldn't remember being touched in love. A few weeks later he publicly expressed his commitment to Christ as Lord and Savior in an evangelistic crusade. Maybe that little girl's hug opened him to God's love. I'm sure that all his problems weren't over. I'm sure that one hug didn't erase all the pain and hurt of the past, but so many of us are so hungry for love that even a little goes a long way.

I think of a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay.

Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink
Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;
Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink
And rise and sink and rise and sink again;
Love can not fill the thickened lung with breath
Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;
Yet many a man is making friends with death
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.

Just as we perish for lack of human love, we also perish for lack of

God's love. But no one *need* perish because God meets our most basic need by loving us. He shows us how much he loves the world by giving us his only Son.

Have you ever wondered if God loves you? I have a hunch that deep down many of us feel that God has it in for us. There are two basic reasons why so many people doubt God's love. For one thing, some of us doubt God's love because we experience so little of human love. I think of a little battered puppy who's been abused and mistreated by someone. That puppy distrusts anyone who comes near. It snarls if you draw close in kindness. It snaps. And if you aren't careful it might bite you. That's the way we often react to God. Life batters and bruises us. People hurt us, loved ones, parents, children or spouse. And for some people hurt is all they know. ~~Sometimes religious people hurt us by condemning and judging~~ us. We become cynical and distrust anybody who expresses concern for us.

And so often we shrink back in fear and distrust from God when God draws near to us. We think God must be coming to judge, perhaps to torture us forever. We know, each one of us knows, that there are areas of our lives that we're ashamed of and for which we condemn ourselves. And if we condemn *ourselves* we expect God to condemn us. But God didn't send his Son into the world to condemn it but that it might be saved through Jesus.

I wonder how many people are here this morning who've managed to keep God at arms length because you've experienced so little of human love. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a royal proclamation that no matter how little of human love you've experienced, God so loved *you* that he gave his one and only Son that *if you* believe in him, trust him, you won't perish for lack of love but have everlasting life.

But there's another reason why some of us doubt God's love. We doubt God's love because we think God loves only "good" people. We doubt that he loves ordinary people who manage to lose their jobs, who get divorced, who get pregnant too soon, who have abortions, who get angry and swear and maybe even hit their loved ones; who lie in a tight spot; who, generally speaking, have a hard time doing what they know they should do and who find it so easy to do what's expedient rather than what's right. Don't we all sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that God loves "good" people, but not ordinary people who so often mess things up for themselves and for people they love?

This is something that many of the 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 was under God's wrath and curse. The~~ pagan world was messed up, degenerate, perverted, lost, disgusting. So it was scandalous when Jesus became such good friends with people of the world. So many of the people Jesus chose to be his closest friends were people of the world, people like Matthew the tax-collector; Zacchaeus the shyster, and Mary Magdalene who had been a particularly sinful woman before she met Jesus.

The Good News of Jesus is that God so loved *the world* in its sin and lostness. 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 ninety-nine good sheep and goes out looking for one bad sheep that's wandered off, and rejoices when he finds it. God is like a woman who cleans every nook and cranny of her home until she finds the coin she lost. God has a special love and concern for prodigals, for lost and

wandering people, for people who feel insignificant and worthless.

But like all love, God's love longs for a response on our part; "whoever believes on him should not perish but have everlasting life." It's possible to reject God's love. But it's hard to reject the love of someone who loves us deeply. Think of the people you really trust. Aren't they the people that you know really love you? It's easy to trust someone who really loves you. And for nearly two thousand years men and women have been seeing in the death of Jesus the proof of God's amazing love for sinners.

Let me just say in closing that from time to time in my life I've had a deep fear of God and of hell. I don't know how common that is anymore, maybe more common than people are willing to admit; but at times I have a recurring fear of perishing. When that fear comes I get no comfort from ~~looking at the things that I've done that I think might impress God a little.~~ Rather, in my imagination, I look to Jesus lifted up on the cross. I tell myself, "There's the proof of God's love for me." That's the God I trust and believe in. I invite you to do the same.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen.