

## The Magnetism of Christ's Love

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson, Pastor of the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on March 22, 1986, Palm/Passion Sunday : Scripture Lesson John 12:20-33.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

I've been talking about love for the last five weeks of Lent. I've been focusing, especially, on human love. How can we learn to love ourselves? others? God? and our enemies? Today, though, I want to focus on God's love. I want us to look at Christ on the cross because there we see God's love for us as nowhere else. There's a strange and fascinating magnetism about the love of Christ displayed on the cross. Christ himself said, "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all to me."

There's something about the way Christ died that has drawn men and women to him over the last 2000 years. Something about the way his arms ~~were outstretched on the cross which contain a strange fascination.~~ Christ might have died some other way. He might have been stoned like Stephen the first Martyr. He might have been beheaded like John the Baptist. He might have been sawn in two as tradition tells us the prophet Isaiah met his death. If he'd been executed today he might have been hung from gallows or placed in the electric chair. If Jesus had died in one of these ways that wouldn't have destroyed the power of his death to reconcile us to God. But if Christ had died in some other way we'd have been deprived of the magnetic symbolism of the cross. One ancient Church Father said that only on the cross does one die with ones arms outstretched.

On Palm Sunday we celebrate the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem where he was proclaimed King for a day. But let's remember that this is also called Passion Sunday and we begin to focus more and more on the suffering of Christ. Christ was proclaimed King on Palm

Sunday but he was enthroned on Good Friday when he was lifted to his throne on the cross by Roman soldiers. The Gospel of John portrays Christ as the one who was in charge at the hour of his crucifixion. John portrays Christ as one who reigns from the Cross. Let's look at that Kingly Figure on the cross and be drawn to him by his love. Let's be drawn to him as if by a magnet as we look at those outstretched arms on the cross. Those outstretched arms tell us of God's magnetic love which is drawing the whole world to himself.

*First, the arms of Jesus are stretched out in invitation.* His outstretched arms are a loving invitation for us to come to him. When our boys were learning to walk Kay would bend over and hold their hands until they got their balance. I'd kneel a few feet opposite her with my arms outstretched. Then I'd invite Andrew or Philip or Mark to come to me.

"Come on Mark. Come to daddy!" The arms of Jesus outstretched on the cross are also an invitation for us to come to our heavenly Father through Christ for forgiveness, for love, for God's grace.

On the cross Jesus is saying to the whole world, "Come to me." "See me lifted up with my arms outstretched to all the world." "Whosoever will may come!" That's what Jesus said throughout his ministry. He went to the fishermen on the sea of Galilee and said to them, "Come to me." He went to the tax-collectors and stretched out his arms to them. "Come to me." He stretched out his arms to little children and said, "Let them come to me." He stretched out his arms to women who were second class citizens and invited them to come to him and learn from him. He came to the crooked and shady dealers and invited them. "Come to me!" He came to the lepers, the crippled, the deaf and dumb and said to them, "Come to me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

And still above the cries of a world torn apart by violence and terrorism, divided by race and clan and wealth and resources we hear the voice of Christ, "Why will you not come to me that you might have life."

Look at Christ lifted up on the cross with his arms outstretched in love and be drawn to him; let the magnetism of his love embrace you. Whoever you are, wherever you are, "Come". Come, if your conscience is weighed down with guilt and you'll find in Christ one who will forgive you. Come, if you're tempted and afraid of the passions within you and you'll find one who will deliver you. Come, if you're perplexed and doubting and you'll find one who is the Truth. Come, if you're lost and meandering aimlessly through life and you'll find one who is the Way. Come, if you're grieving and suffering and you'll find one who shares all our sorrows. Come if you've made terrible mistakes and feel that your life is ruined and you'll find one who can put you back together again. And if you've wandered away from the family of God and your heavenly Father over the months and years, come home and you'll find in God a Father with his arms outstretched to welcome the prodigal.

"Come!" that's what those outstretched arms on the cross are saying to us. His arms are stretched out in loving invitation.

*Secondly, Christ's arms are stretched out to protect you.* Once Jesus wept over Jerusalem. He cried, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often would I have gathered your children together, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and you would not." As a mother hen stretches out her wings to protect her brood, so also Christ stretches out his arms on the cross to protect us.

On the cross Jesus stretched out his arms to protect us from the consequences of our own foolish and sinful actions and mistakes. God

doesn't send anyone to hell. We go there of our own free will. On the cross Jesus stretched out his arms to protect us from the harmful consequences of the evil things we say and do and fail to do.

Sometimes Christians have portrayed God the Father as a God so angry with sinners that he must vent his anger somehow and on someone. Jesus is portrayed as the innocent bystander who loves humankind so much that he offers to be the object of God's wrath in order to protect us from God's fury. So God vents all of his hatred of sin on Christ who protects us from hell.

I believe that's a distortion of the Gospel and a distortion of God's wrath and grace. Rather on the cross we see, not an innocent bystander who volunteers to be the victim of God's wrath. On the cross we see God himself in Christ. We see God himself choosing to go to hell in our place; protecting us from hell and judgment and condemnation. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself not counting our trespasses against us. So on the cross we see in Jesus God himself with his arms outstretched to protect us from the hell and judgement that we all deserve.

I can remember how, as a four year old child, my mother and aunt took me to a football stadium in Downingtown to see a fireworks display. Each time a rocket went up it would explode with a loud thunder clap that terribly frightened me. I cried and screamed in terror. But there was a friend sitting next to us who stretched out his arms to me. He put his arms around me and covered my head with his jacket so that the noise was muffled and the flashes of light couldn't be seen and I felt protected. That's what God wants to do for us. In Christ we see his arms outstretched on the cross to protect us.

Sometimes we become frightened by the holiness and justice of God and

his unbending and absolute laws. Even in our day and age we sometimes still discover deep within us a vague and haunting fear of hell and judgment. Then again no one can look at this world and not be frightened by the threat of war, natural disasters, and the uncertainty of our world's future. But on the cross we see the outstretched arms of a man who is the Lord of Life and the Prince of Peace. His arms are outstretched in love to protect us from that nuclear holocaust and from the judgement we bring upon ourselves. Let his love draw you to him for protection and safety and comfort. His arms are outstretched to protect you.

*Thirdly, the arms of Christ are outstretched in blessing.* Look at that man lifted up on the cross with his arms stretched out to bless us and be drawn to him by his magnetic love. When Jesus died on the cross his arms were stretched out. Joseph of Arimathea came along and took down his body, wrapped it and prepared it for burial. There the body of Jesus lay lifeless in the tomb until, on Easter Sunday, he was raised from the dead by the power of God. He came back to his disciples and stretched out his arms once more over them in blessing. There was Peter who had denied his Lord yet Jesus stretched out his arms to bless him. There was Thomas who had doubted. But Jesus stretched out his arms to bless him. And he's here this morning, risen from the dead, with his arms outstretched to bless you today, to make us truly happy to serve and obey him within the Church, the Body of Christ.

I once read of a Christian businessman in London who was also a lay preacher at a mission on the east side of London. Since he had an interest in engineering he visited the Railway Engineering Works at Swindon outside London one day. A young engineer showed him around and after the tour was over the two men walked slowly to the gate of the factory. They

stood for a few minutes talking. The lay-preacher was thanking the young man for taking the time to show him around. Then he went to say, "Goodbye" and shake-hands with the engineer. But when he took the engineer's hand it felt cold and fishy. The young manager was embarrassed by his weak hand-shake and explained, "When I was an apprentice I had an accident. A nail was driven all the way through my hand and I've never been able to close it since." At that moment the lay preacher laid his hand on the young manager's should and said, "Nineteen hundred years ago there was a young carpenter in Nazareth. They drove a nail through his hands, and he's never been able to close them since."

As you leave this church this morning I'd like you to see this vision of Christ crucified, his hands outstretched. I'd like you to see him risen from the dead, alive, and present with us this morning with his arms still outstretched in love-- stretched out in invitation; stretched out in protection; stretched out in blessing. If you're a visitor or haven't worshipped with us for some time I'd like you also to see in this worship service and in the people of this church, the Body of Christ, whose arms are outstretched in love to you. And as we see him high and lifted up, may we all be drawn to him, to fall at his feet, to worship him, to trust him, to obey him as Lord, both now and forever. Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious God, you have called us into your Church to be the Body of Christ in the world. May the world and this community of Oxford see something of Christ in us. May they see in us the arms of Christ stretched out in invitation, protection and blessing and may they experience in us something of the magnetic love of Christ our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.