

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

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First Love

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:7-21

Not long ago, I was comparing notes with a preacher friend of mine about some of the awkward situations in which we've found ourselves as leaders of worship with clergy of another faith. It turns out that we'd both had the experience of conducting a funeral service with a Pentecostal pastor. For me, it was the funeral of an elderly Hispanic woman. From the way we were dressed, the cars we drove, our cadence, and approach to worship, no one could have been confused about which one of us was the Pentecostal and which one was the Presbyterian. As for how our theologies might have complemented or contradicted one another, I cannot say. In the service I helped to lead, the other preacher's remarks were mostly in Spanish.

But for my friend, the service was entirely in English. It was a tragic situation. A young boy was killed when he ran out into the street. My friend described the love of God for this boy, mourned the tragedy of it all, claimed that God also wept over such a senseless death, and lifted up the hope of the resurrection which promises to wipe away tears and vanquish finally the evils of our world. The point of view he expressed was well within the bounds of our Reformed tradition in a modern day

in which we continue to wrestle with that age-old conundrum “why do bad things happen to good people?”

When my friend was finished with his remarks, he sat down, and the other preacher rose and began addressing those assembled. “God did not cry over the death of this boy,” the preacher thundered. “God knew what he was doing. He took that child for a reason. We may not understand the reason, but God had a reason for that boy to die.” A great chorus of ‘Amens’ erupted from the congregation, as my friend tried to sink beneath his seat.

Now, I know that there is a certain comfort that may come from knowing that God is in charge and that the world is not spinning out of control, even in the midst of our own loss and grief. But what a scary picture of God we have in this case! God is powerful, according to this preacher, but also capricious enough to have reason to squash a little boy in the street.

A fundamental question of theology, a fundamental question in our life of faith can be simply stated: Is God for us? Is God for us or against us?

There are many in the world who live in fear of a god or gods whose love must be earned; they spend their time trying to appease their gods, trying to butter them up, or buy them off; or their gods are easily offended, quick to punish, and ready to take revenge. But, they are not worshipping the Christian God, who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The God whose very being is love.

Yet we know that our relationship with God has been strained. In the face of God's love, we show indifference. Sustained by God's generosity, we are tight-fisted. Receiving God's mercy, we hold on to grudges. We have wounded the heart of God. Yes, God does grieve, for we have strayed from him. However, the miracle of grace teaches a surprising lesson: it is not the guilty but the injured one who acts to restore this broken relationship. God makes the first move. God creates peace with us.

That is the meaning of the death of Jesus as it's summed up in the theological notion of atonement, a richly suggestive term easily misunderstood. Here is how the Apostle John uses the word: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

At the most basic level, atonement means making a payment or offering reparation for a wrong which has been committed. If I hurt you, I need to atone for it in order to restore the relationship. Some injuries, however, are so grave that we simply cannot pay the price. In the case of our relationship with God, the price is paid by Jesus. In fact, this financial image is one of the ways the New Testament seeks to explain the atonement. But, this image and others raise many questions, perhaps more than they answer. To whom is the payment or the sacrifice made? Is it to Satan as some traditions contend? Or is it paid to God as others hold.

But herein lies a problem. To say that God exacts a price from his Son suggests that God has one intention toward us, but Jesus has another. Because of the sacrifice of Jesus, God accepts us, but otherwise God would be out to get us, intent on destroying us in wrath?

We believe what Scripture asserts: God the Father and God the Son are one. They are not in conflict with each other. And they are not at war with us. As one theologian reminds us, Jesus came to express the will of God, not to change it. His work is God's work.

The Apostle Paul offers this assurance, "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Jesus died, not so that God could start loving us, but because God has always loved us, and always will.

The idea that I keep coming back to, and which is so prominent in John's letter, is the priority of God's love. God's love comes first, and everything else flows from that: creation, incarnation, and redemption. God's love is that unifying principle which holds all things together. Does that mean God never gets angry? Well, no. But God gets angry out of love. God cares enough about us that God does not want us to continue in broken patterns of life. So, God bears the painful consequences of our sin.

It is this love, this overarching, and all-sustaining love, that makes our own love possible. "We love," John writes, "because he first loved us." In one simple,

elegant expression we find the deepest theological truth. “We love, because he first loved us.”

We try to make this formula complicated. We question it. We argue with it. We add conditions onto it. “How could our relationship with God be this straightforward?”

Witness the great popularity of the Dan Brown novels, now films, and other cultural attacks on the faith. Surely, there is a deep and sinister secret at the heart of Christianity, they would argue, not a simple commitment, however imperfect, to the God who loves us all.

In fact, to say “God is love,” sounds too elementary to many. How much better to make it all conditional. “God will love you if . . .,” and you can attach whatever condition you think appropriate. I can imagine that if I were to advertize a sermon next week on the topic, “How to Make God Love You,” we might have standing-room only next Sunday. But those who found the teaser so inviting would surely be disappointed by the point I would have to make. How do you make God love you? You can’t. Fortunately, none of us can make God hate us, either. His love comes first, and lasts forever. So, what is there for us to do, if we cannot make God love us?

Robert McAfee Brown has written, “The gospel says, ‘God already loves you, so trust him. The gospel does not say, Trust God and he will love you’.”¹ Herein

we find both the source of faith and its consequence. That is why we need to hear, we need to know, and we need to believe that God's love comes first. It is what allows us to live in communion with one another and with him. To live fully, that is.

Imagine, if you will, an analogy suggested by Shirley Guthrie between our relationship with God and the relationship between a husband and wife.

If a man's wife does not already love him, there is probably not anything he can do to force her to love him. He can bring her presents. He can worship the ground she walks on. He can trust her, and believe in her completely, but these activities on his part cannot cause love to blossom between them.

On the other hand, if she does love him, he can neither receive nor return her love if he lacks faith in her. If he constantly has doubts about her intentions towards him, or if he is always questioning whether he is good enough for her, the marriage will be forever spoiled. It will never work because of his suspicions about her or his own doubts about his own lovability. However, the marriage can be happy if he believes that her love is genuine. And, believing that, he will respond to her with great affection.

That is how it is with God. We cannot force God to love us, no matter how much we attend to God, believe in God, have faith in God. On the other hand, if we continually question God's love of us and question even if God ever could love the

likes of us, we cut ourselves off from the very love he desires to share with us. Trusting God, believing in God's benevolence and love is the way that we begin to acknowledge, receive, enjoy and return "the love that God had for us long before we ever thought of loving him"²

That is the message for us all this day, and a simple message it is, but some think it should be more complicated than it is.

Many years ago on a visit to America, Karl Barth, that towering figure of twentieth-century theology, was asked by a reporter, "Professor Barth, could you sum up your theology for us in just a few words?" Of course, the reporter was looking for what we now call a sound bite, and the learned professor, after a moment's thought gave him one. "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

About ten years ago, I read a piece by another theologian who took Barth to task for this answer. He noted that Barth was the author of numerous volumes of academic prose, some of the most complex and comprehensive theological ruminations composed in the modern era. He had let down his students, he had let down his colleagues, he had let down his discipline and the public at large, with such a simple response. But, what other answer could he have given? What other answer should he have given? Could any one of us sum up the faith in a more

complete way? If you can, please let me know. But in the meantime, we have a faith to sing about.

¹ *The Spirit of Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).

² Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994) p 323.