

“God is Love”

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-12

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John 4:7-12: ⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Valentine’s Day has come and gone again. And we were flooded with advertisements about love. Love means chocolate...love means flowers...love means cards...love means diamonds...love means a new car...I must confess that at first I had hard time figuring out the Valentine’s Day Sale at Ace Hardware but then I guess I would rather have a tool than a bouquet of flowers! Love is a great topic...the dating services, the advice columns, the music, the poetry. We all know what love looks like...or do we?

Our text today says, “God is love.” And the word order here is important. It is not “Love is God.” If that were the case, then God would be a flower-sending, chocolate-sending, diamond-sending, hardware-sending, new car sending, and whatever-else-we-associate-with-getting from someone who loves us. No, the words order here is absolutely important: God is love. And what love really is...what love actually looks like...is what God is and what God does.

God’s love is defined here in the text: “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son...” Love looks like Jesus. Now that may be churchy...that may sound irrelevant to your busy life...it may sound like pious talk. But here it is: God’s love looks like Jesus...God’s valentine.

God’s love is costly...and it is not about money. Ask someone who has sent a loved one off to some dangerous place—whether it is Iraq or Clemson... or preschool. Are we concerned about money? No, what we are concerned about is life. God’s sending his Son costs life. It is like the old stewardship analogy about what the difference is between a contribution to the church and a faithful gift. It is like asking the chicken or the pig about their participation in a bacon and egg breakfast. Eggs come and go—that’s a contribution. Bacon demands life—that’s a faithful gift.

God’s love is about sacrifice...and not about who’s in charge. God does not send an army...a hurricane...a lightning bolt...or stroke or deadly disease. God’s ultimate relationship with us is not based on power. God is not saying, “I am going whip you all into shape.” God’s ultimate relationship is based on this sort of love in the sending of the Son.

There is that haunting Lenten hymn that we do not sing very often. It is modal or in minor key, so it doesn't have enough pep for most us.

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul.
What wondrous love is this, O my soul.
What wondrous love is that caused the Lord of bliss
To bear the dreadful curse, for my soul, for my soul.
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul!

It is midway between a question and exclamation. What wondrous love is this? What wondrous love is this! There is no accounting for this sending...except that it is love.

If that did not astonish us enough, God also has the audacity to ask us to love in the same way. To be children of God is to be those who act like God. We have the proverbial saying about a child: "The acorn does not fall from the tree." That is, what the child does is so much like what the parent has done. So our text declares: everyone who loves—loves like God does...everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. And love is this costly sacrifice that is not about power but about persuasion and invitation and acceptance.

I believe it was the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther who once said you could really tell about the God that people worship by what they sacrifice. Luther particularly spoke of parents: for what would you sacrifice your child? May none of us ever have to answer that question. It is one thing to choose sacrifice for me...but for my children? It is bit unfair to ask, but how many of the sons and daughters of our national leaders have served in Iraq? In previous wartime situations—particularly Viet Nam but it was true of other wars as well—many of the children of those in authority were those who seemed to be out harm's way.

So let me tell you a long story about what the love looks like when the "acorn does not fall far from the tree." I will confess I am not there yet...but I want to be. Here's the story...a true one from the autobiography of Will Campbell. Will Campbell is a white Southerner, a Baptist preacher, who was a minister in Nashville, Tennessee in the late 50s. In 1956, nine black children had enrolled in schools that had been set aside for white children. And a white man named John Kasper had organized the community against integration. Each day, a shouting and jeering mob would block the entrances to the schools. Police would have to open a corridor through the mob to let the black children enter.

One school was dynamited in the night. Once, the mob picked up stones and began to throw them at the school, breaking windows. Will Campbell found himself spending an evening in a black church because of the threats that it would be blown up. By staying in the church building, it was hoped that the threat to bomb the building would not happen. The pastor of this church's congregation, Kelly Smith, had a young daughter who was one of the nine black children who faced the mob each day.

Will Campbell and Kelly Smith were talking about the situation. Pastor Smith let his little girl,

named Joy, walk that gauntlet of hecklers to go to school. Campbell asked Smith: “Kelly, what if something happens to little Joy?”

Kelly Smith opened the Bible in his study and began to read from the book of Genesis. He turned to that story about Abraham, how the Lord told Abraham to take his only little boy Isaac up on a mountain, tie him on a pile of wood, cut his throat, and burn him.

Take now thy Son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. [Gen. 22:2, KJV]

Smith looked up at Will Campbell: “You see, my brother, we don’t even get to choose the mountain!” Smith continued to read:

....and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. . . . [Genesis 22:9-10; KJV]

Campbell almost cried as Kelly Smith closed the Bible. But Kelly Smith laughed.

“Will, we’re talking about some hard sayings. We are talking about faithfulness to Almighty God; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God of my black mama and daddy in Mississippi and your white mama and daddy in Mississippi.”

Then, calling to mind the end of that story of Isaac, where God stops Abraham with the knife raised in the air to slay his only son, Kelly Smith quoted from memory.

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked and behold, behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns.[Genesis 22:13; KJV]

Kelly Smith was recalling the conclusion to this story of Abraham and Isaac. The story concludes with Abraham taking that ram out of the thicket and sacrificing the ram instead of his son. Thinking of his daughter, Kelly Smith bowed and prayed: “Lord, make the thicket tight and ram’s horn long. Amen.” Kelly Smith prayed that God would provide a substitute.

Kelly Smith sent his daughter to school, which instead of being a parental joy, it was like Abraham binding his son on the altar. Kelly Smith’s prayer was that God would provide a ram, as was the case with Isaac. He prayed for a tight thicket, which would trap a ram, and for a ram with long horns more likely to be caught.

Will Campbell recounts going home late that evening and going into his 6-year-old daughter’s room. As he watched her sleep, he was moved to kneel and pray. But he stifled the prayer on his lips and got up off his knees. For the prayer he was about to offer was “Thank God, my daughter is white.” She was not an “Isaac” bound on the altar. He did not have to pray for a

tight thicket and ram with long horns.

As for Kelly Smith's little girl. . . she became an actress in New York. Years later, she would explain why she wasn't afraid that police corridor in the middle of jeering crowd. "I heard the talk," she said, "at home, in church, in the news. I knew that there was something special about my going to that particular school." Because she was so secure in the love of those close to her, she assumed that the crowds had turned out in her honor. She even remembered wanting to go back to the school door after entering one morning when the mob was particularly noisy outside of her classroom—going back to take a bow, the curtain call. An actress was born in that heckling and harassment—the thicket was the tight and ram's horns were long.¹

What wondrous love is this, O my soul!

How do we respond to God who loves us? It seems more than we can handle. Our Scripture text today is short on actual prescriptions of how to be loving. There are no quick answers to what I should do this afternoon, tomorrow, or the next day. Love is so much harder than commandments that you can check off your list and be done with. Love demands our life.

The writer Kathleen Norris once noted,

One so often hears people say, "I just can't handle it," when they reject a biblical image of God as Father, as Mother, as Lord or Judge; God as lover, as angry or jealous, God on a cross. I find this choice of words revealing, however real the pain they reflect: if we seek a God we can "handle," that will be exactly what we get. A God we can manipulate, suspiciously like ourselves, the wideness of whose mercy we've cut down to size.²

We cannot cut God down to size. . . we cannot cut love down to size. Remember the words of Isaac Watts in the poem we sing: *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*. Watts reflects on what it means to see the love of God expressed in a cross. He concludes:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

¹ Will D. Campbell, *40 Acres and A Goat*, page 51, 52

² Quote clipped from *Dakota* by Kathleen Norris, I think?