

Sermon, July 30, 2023

Romans 8: 26-39

“Are There Limits to God’s Love?”

This morning I would like to tell you a story. It’s a very personal story about an experience I had many years ago, and it is a story that I have never told anyone before. I’ve kept the story a secret, first, because it is personal, but also because many, if not most people, would not believe it.

Once upon a time, (all good stories begin that way), I lived in a house in Connecticut that was directly across the road from a mill. The mill sat alongside a large pond whose water flowed towards a waterfall and moved the large paddle wheel on its side. The water then cascaded down into a stream that went under a small bridge, and then ran parallel to the house we lived in.

On occasion I liked to sit down by the stream to enjoy the warmth of the sun, listen to the water as it rushed by, as well as to meditate and pray. I don’t know what prompted me to do so, but one day while in prayer I said to God that I wanted to know what it was like to love in the way that He loved. No sooner were the words out of my mouth than everything around me - the water, the tall grass, the bushes and trees that lined the banks of the stream all took on a warm golden glow, and I felt something deep inside of me unlike anything I had ever experienced before. It was overwhelming. In fact, it was so overpowering that as soon as it began, I begged for it to stop - which it did.

I would not blame you if you do not believe the story - there are times when I have wondered if it really happened, or if it was my imagination run amuck; but there is one thing I do not doubt. In all the years since, I have spent countless hours reading philosophy, theology, spirituality, and church history, and I have had my moments of doubt and times of disbelief; but ever since that day down by the old mill stream, I have never doubted three words from the fourth chapter of 1st John - three simple words - **God is Love!**

God’s love is deep and wide, and extends well beyond us, but embraces the whole of Creation, from the smallest of creatures to the planet and the Universe beyond.

God is love, and because God is love, we who follow his Son Jesus are called to mirror that divine love in the way that we act and behave in the world. How important is it that we do so? Paul said it best in First Corinthians 13. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, to move mountains, but do

not have love I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing”.

When asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus replied, that we must love God and that we must love our neighbors as ourselves. But then, just for good measure, he adds that we should love our enemies. Of all of his teachings that may be the most difficult to follow - but it may also be the most important, for it can break the cycle of hatefulness and violence that plagues this world. Person against person, church against church, religion against religion, nation against nation - like Jesus, and with his help, we need to learn how to love what is perceived as unlovable, if we are ever to achieve some level of peace in this world.

In the words of the late Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, and Christian martyr, “Let us not tire of preaching love; it is the force that will overcome the world”. And the way that we best preach love is by living it, respecting the dignity of all people, advocating for both human and civil rights, fighting against hatred and prejudice, giving aid to the hungry and thirsty, protecting the lives of those in the animal kingdom, especially the endangered species, and caring for the health of the planet as a whole! As John wrote in his gospel, “For God so loved the world” - we too much strive to love as God loves.

Now, in reference to our own relationship with God, our reading this morning insists that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus - absolutely nothing! I disagree! There is one thing that can separate us from God’s love. What is that one thing? It is **us!** You see, God extends his love for us in the form of grace, and in that grace, we are given the freedom to say **Yes** or **No**. This does not mean that God stops loving us, but that we choose to live in rebellion towards that divine love largely by refusing to extend that love to both God and neighbor. We choose to live as if God’s love for us is not real. But that golden glow down by the old mill stream tells me otherwise! But even when we say no to God’s yes, in his grace there is always a pathway back to that warm divine embrace!

In a chapel of a church in Rome called *Santa Maria Della Vittoria*, there is a beautiful marble sculpture by the Baroque sculptor, Bernini called *The Ecstasy of St Teresa of Avila*. It depicts Teresa reposed in a state of religious ecstasy, while an angel stands over her holding a spear. If I may, I will conclude with Teresa’s own description of the experience.

“I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron’s point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails, when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet was so surpassing was the sweetness of the excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now

with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual, though the body has its share in it. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between the soul and God, that I pray God of his goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying”.

Sometimes the love of God is all sunshine and roses. Sometimes it is fire, not unlike the tongues like fire that descended on the disciples on the day of Pentecost - a fire that both warms the soul and ignites a passion to live in God’s love and to extend that love to a world so much in need of greater love. Amen.

Let us pray: God of ceaseless love, we praise your Holy Name, and thank you for the many blessings in this life. We thank you for your Son Jesus through whom we see your love shine through, and we rejoice in the presence of your Holy Spirit who lifts our spirits and leads us in the pathways of faith. We thank you for the gift of your blessed Church, as always hoping for greater unity as well as renewal. Lead our congregation so that we may always be a blessing for our community. We lift before you those in our community in need of help, especially for those without a home. Keep them safe in this heat. We extend this prayer as well for those around the world who suffer in poverty. Help us to create a world where none goes hungry and lead us all in the ways of peace. Help us to find greater understanding between all the world’s great religions that we may join in harmony to create a better life for all. In all things let your love shine forth...Amen.