

Series: Walking in the Way of Love

“Wondrous Love”

Introduction: In our gospel reading for this Palm Sunday, we see Jesus traveling up to Jerusalem from Jericho on the same road, in our reading from last week, the man was traveling down in Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan. It is a difficult, fifteen mile stretch of road, as from Jericho up to Jerusalem is a 4500-foot elevation gain, making the journey a significant climb. But it was also difficult in that it was a road filled with bandits hiding in caves along the way, who, remember, attacked the traveler in the parable. They stripped him and beat him and left him lying on the road half dead.

By the end of this week, Jesus would also have been stripped and beaten and left hanging on a cross, *fully* dead. If the parable of the Good Samaritan was to teach us about the reach of our love for others—beyond any limit we may want to set or line we might be tempted to draw—the death of Jesus was to be a demonstration of the wondrous reach of God’s love for us, beyond what we could ask or imagine.

This is an important pairing, for, to reach out to others, we need to understand and experience this incredible reach of God’s love to us. As the guiding text for our sermon series, “Walking in the Way of Love” puts it:

Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us . . . Eph. 5:1-2.

I. The Two Primary Paradigms of Love

A. Gordon Smith, a wonderful teacher and writer that I had the privilege of studying under during some sabbatical time a few years ago, writes about the importance of experiencing God’s love:

Nothing is so fundamental to the Christian journey as knowing and feeling that we are loved. Nothing. . . It is from the experience of God’s love that we know the grace of God and live out every other dimension of our Christian faith. . . However, though God’s love is the obvious message of Scripture, it can never be assumed that we comprehend this love. Again and again we must call one another back to the wonder of this love. [*The Voice of Jesus*, 74-75]

B. As we consider God’s wondrous love, at the beginning of the week when he takes that love all the way to the cross, it’s helpful to remember that there are two basic spiritual paradigms that exist in the world. The paradigm we might call “religion” believes that if there is a god, then we relate to this god by being good. If we perform well, this god will accept us and do good things for us. In this paradigm, notice, we live to earn love, and god, in effect, is in our debt. By way of contrast, the paradigm that is Christianity claims that we relate to God by being grateful, that through the ministry of Jesus, God has accepted us and begun to do good things for us before we have done a thing. In this paradigm, we live not to earn God’s love but simply to receive it and live from it. We are in God’s debt. Therefore, what is key for our living and our loving, what is instrumental in helping us walk in the way of love just as Christ loved us, is to be assured of this love, to receive it and live in it deep down with confidence. Paul writes that this assurance takes place through the outer, objective witness of the Son (knowing we are loved), and the inner, subjective witness of the Spirit (feeling we are loved).

II. The Outer, Objective Witness of the Son

A. The outer, objective witness of the Son begins, in many ways, on what we call Palm Sunday. Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a colt, on the foal of a donkey. Had he been riding a horse, it would have indicated he had come to declare war. But a donkey was an animal that symbolized peace. Jesus had come to bring peace. He had come, not to bear a sword against others but to allow others to bear a sword against him. He had come to take evil and sin and hatred and death upon himself so that we might have peace with God. He had come so that our relationship with God might be restored.

B. What makes such love so wondrous is that we have done nothing to deserve it. Someone, Paul observes, might be willing to die for a righteous person, or even possibly for a good person. But who would be willing to die for an ungodly person? Christ would, and did! As Paul explains, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

C. Several hymn writers have endeavored to put this wondrous news into song, which is sometimes an easier way for us to grasp this extraordinary truth. That most famous of Christmas carols, “Joy to the World,” ends with the refrain: “and wonders of his love....” as it anticipates the curse of sin Jesus has come to do away with. A lesser-known hymn, which we’ll sing in a few minutes, is the Lenten hymn, “What Wondrous Love Is This?” It, too, celebrates the bearing of the curse that Jesus took upon himself. And then there’s “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” which is a little more familiar and celebrates the amazing, undeserved love of God for us as we see it demonstrated on the cross, the uttermost symbol of love there is.

D. We need to keep “tuning our hearts” to songs like these because another song keeps pushing its message into our minds and our hearts. It has trained us since our youth. You know it, it plays on loudspeakers in our shopping malls at Christmastime. It’s called “Santa Claus is Comin’ to Town:”

You better watch out, you better not cry, better not pout I’m telling you why:

Santa Claus is comin’ to town. He sees you when you’re sleepin’, he knows when you’re awake,
he knows if you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake...

This may seem like an innocent song to teach our children, but when you really think about it, what a frightening song! An all-knowing figure who tries to scare you into good behavior. A song that cuts the heart out of the cross, says you only get what you deserve, and drives us to live out of the paradigm that is religion. If you’re not good, you have no hope.

But Paul declares that the love demonstrated on the cross is not like that. It loves even when, and especially when, we’ve been bad. It loves even in the midst of times of suffering and helps us persevere through them. Because of what Jesus did in the past, we can have peace with God in the present and hope for the future. This is the outer, objective witness of the Son—what God has done.

E. Now, all of that said, this wondrous love of God, this objective witness, is still not easy for us to take in! Sadly, many of us have grown up with a you-get-what-you-deserve, Santa Claus is Comin to Town kind of home, or church. Or, we’ve been hurt by those who should’ve loved us but didn’t, or couldn’t. Henri Nouwen has suggested that we consistently experience the love of God against the backdrop of the love we experience through others, like parents, teachers, spouses, and friends. Sometimes this love is positive; at many other times, it’s not. Those who ought to have demonstrated

the love of God to us instead let us down and betrayed that love. All of which makes it possible to know of God's love in our heads, but still have difficulty actually feeling it or experiencing it inwardly.

F. Now, some will argue that feelings don't really matter, that it's not necessary to feel God's love; it's enough to know it intellectually. Just acknowledge that it's true, believe it and feelings will follow, it is said. This is sometimes pictured by a train, where the engine up front represents the facts of our faith, and the caboose at the back represents our feelings. But the picture Paul draws for us, one who was quite the intellectual in his own right, is more like an airplane. Both wings, the wing of facts the wing of feelings, are necessary to fly (live) well and to love others just as Christ has loved us.

III. The Inner, Subjective Witness of the Spirit

A. This is where the subjective, inner witness of the Holy Spirit comes into play. "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." The Spirit is a gift who comes with the fact of our faith. One aspect of his role is to convey the wondrous love of God to our senses, to our feelings, to help us experience the cross not just as a transaction that takes away our sin, but an incredible act of love that undergirds an ongoing relationship with the living God. The Spirit's role is to assure us that not only is God amazingly good, but that he is amazingly good to you. This pouring is not a one-time event but a daily, constant activity.

B. The question is, how does it happen? I would suggest to you that it takes practice, and intentionality, on our part, putting ourselves at the Spirit's disposal by stopping and noticing. There's another old hymn with the title, "Take Time to Be Holy." Well, what we want to do is to take time to notice. What are we to notice? Gordon Smith sums up a host of spiritual writing when he says this about how to begin our times of prayer:

Begin by spending five minutes in reflection upon the preceding day, identifying those things for which we are grateful. . . The grace we seek is to live in awareness of the goodness and love of God. [p. 167]

What he is encouraging us to do is simply observe the blessings that come from God's hand that we can miss if we just keep plunging ahead with our day and never stop to be quiet and still. We might also take another five minutes to identify those times and places where we had a sense of connection with God, and those times and places where we did not. We might ask: Where did I meet God in our day? Where did I miss him? Where did I feel close to him and where did I feel distant? Where was I able to give love and where did I hold back? Notice that these are not transactional questions but relational ones. As we notice those things, we can then thank him for his goodness and love, ask forgiveness for those places where we failed to receive it or offer it, and ask for a deepening sense of his presence as we begin the day ahead and look forward with hope.

C. This week ahead, as Jesus takes the final steps of his journey to the cross and the incredible demonstration of his love that will take place there, might be a good time to begin to practice such noticing. Jesus' love for us is absolutely wondrous. We don't want to miss it! May we both know it, and feel it, so that we can rest in it, and then reach out and offer it to others, loving them just as Christ has loved us.