

Scandalous Love

In a moment, we'll join together in our communion liturgy. I'll say the words, "Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. That proves God's love toward us." And for some of you, that might resonate very deeply. And for others, sure it's poetic language, but it doesn't actually prove anything. But when it comes right down to it, I'm not sure we can prove that anyone loves anyone. Or anything. Only you know what you feel.

Part of living with other people, however, is expressing to others how you feel. And one thing most of us have learned (usually the hard way), is that sometimes you have to express the same emotion differently for different people. That's essentially what the Bible is. It's God trying to express his relentless, unbridled, unconditional, love for the people he has created. And some of the stories resonate with us, because God is expressing his love in a way we understand. And some of the stories don't make sense, because that's not an expression that makes sense to us, either because of our personalities or our culture.

You'll notice, a good love letter is maybe 1-2 handwritten pages. That's what, one page typed? If the Bible is God's way of expressing his love for people, he seems to be a bit on the wordy side. Part of that is because the Bible is also the story of people rebelling against God's love, refusing to see it, recognize it, or accept it. And sometimes God had to just keep repeating his message, over and over. Lather, rinse, repeat. But sometimes, God had to find new ways to express his love, to share his message with a different people.

It's one of the reasons that the Bible continues to be such a powerful book, thousands of years after it was written. It's why it is meaningful in a wide variety of cultures across the globe. It's even why conservatives and liberals can both love this book. Because God is a master at

sharing the same message in different ways. God's scandalous love for his people cannot be contained by a single expression.

I don't usually borrow from pop psychology when I explain God, but I'm going to make an exception tonight. Dr. Gary Chapman has attempted to make relationships more enduring by explaining what he calls the Five Love Languages. He says, essentially, that when people express love, they tend to use one of five ways to do it. If I express love in one way, and my partner expresses love in a different way, we may not fully understand the love each is communicating.

I admit I have not read any of Chapman's books or articles. But I agree that we express and comprehend emotions in different ways. And if we can figure that out about ourselves, then surely God has figured that out. Especially in and through Jesus Christ, from prophecy to resurrection, God has found multiple ways to exhibit his unrelenting love.

As we go through our lessons and carols tonight, you will see that each one expresses God's love for us in a different way. In Isaiah, as in many of the other prophets, we hear a promise of a coming savior. He is described by what he will do for us. He will bring justice, release the captives, comfort those who mourn. Not only will we recognize him as the Messiah by what he does, we will recognize God's love by what he does. At least, those of us who best express love through Acts of Service will. If you go out of your way to do things for someone you love, not because you have to or because they expect it, but just because you love them, this may be the Scripture that proves God's love for you. Because this is God going out of his way to do things for us. Providing for us by doing those tasks that we can't always do for ourselves.

But maybe you best express love through Physical Touch. This is church, on Christmas Eve. I'm not talking about sex here, right? But physical touch includes all kinds of things:

holding hands, tousling someone's hair, snuggling while watching TV. And no, there isn't a Scripture reading where Jesus snuggles with us. But the fact that Jesus was born at all is a powerful expression of touch. Emmanuel, God With Us, is a literal expression of God's love. God came among us as one of us. One who could be seen, and heard, and touched. In Luke, when we recall the manger scene of Christ's birth, think of all the physical sensations that night. The softness of a blanket, the warmth of another person's body heat against the cold, the scratchiness of the hay... The incarnation reminds us that God can be as far away as eternity but chose to become as close as a touch.

Jesus expressed the love of God throughout his life, not just at his birth. When he spent time with his followers, making them a priority, he proved God's love for those who value Quality Time. If all you want is to be with the one you love, you probably find great meaning in the story of Mary and Martha. There is work to be done – so much work that it is overwhelming for Martha to do by herself. But Jesus declares that spending time with Mary is more important than washing the dishes or preparing the food. He proves his love by saying that in this moment, she is the most important thing to him.

Some of us feel like we can best prove our love when we give gifts. Not just for the sake of throwing money around. I'm talking about those relational kinds of gifts where the gift itself shows how well you know the person. Like in O. Henry's *Gift of the Magi*, where a man and woman sacrifice what they value most in order to give one another what each wants most. It's giving a thoughtful gift that reminds the recipient that they are known and valued above other things. If this is how you best receive love, you probably resonate with our reading from John when Jesus talks about giving eternal life to his followers. What greater gift can there be?

Unless for you, love is best understood quite simply. By what someone says to you. You crave hearing those three little Words of Affirmation, "I love you." And you know God loves you when Jesus tells his disciples that they are not his servants, they are his friends. When he lets them know that they are so valuable to him that he chose them. They didn't choose him. God was so in love with them that he pursued them and brought them into this relationship. For you, this proves God's love.

When I say Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, it initially may call to mind only an act of service. He did this great thing for me. But on a deeper level, it calls to mind everything else Christ did with his life and death and glorious resurrection. We were yet sinners, he made time for us and called us his friends. He touched and healed. He gave us justice and eternal life. Not because we deserved it, but because he loved us so greatly. God does indeed prove his love for us, over and over again. And tonight is just the start. Amen and amen.