

God's Love, Our Response

sermon digest

November 10, 2013

I John 4:7
susan parrish

It is again my pleasure for me to be able to be with you this morning in this capacity. So thank you for being here and for walking with me on this journey today.

Last week, the sermon dealt with our attitude toward prayer and how it sometimes is from a very childish perspective. Today, I'd like to add another element to our thinking and include our childish attitude toward love. While it is the ultimate foundation on which our faith is built, it can also be the most structurally unsound of all our foundation elements when we use it from the default perspective – that of easy love.

One of the earliest memories I have of accomplishment happened when I was about four years old. I remember coming home from church one Sunday and before Mom could get lunch on the table, I had to share my news. For background, you need to know that in our Sunday School class there was an assignment each week for us to learn a "Bible verse" each week. Now to be honest, these verses were actually nothing more than phrases that were taken from a portion of Scripture but these were truths important to the story we would have that day and they were given to us to learn prior to the specific Sunday. My news this week was that I had learned a REAL Bible verse – not just any phrase, but a real big kid's verse, one that also had the scripture reference along with it. I remember thinking that I was a big girl because now I knew a verse along WITH the reference. Previously, I had learned the "kiddie verses" that were only the phrases without a reference. I proudly told them my verse, which just happens to be one that was read this morning, "Love one another. I John 4:7, I said." Mom beamed, which was just the reaction I was looking for. My pastor father, glowed even more.

The conversation that then happened around the lunch table was also a part of this memory. We talked about what those verses mean. I remember that we did talk about it, I just don't remember what all was said. Unfortunately, I'm afraid that is where most of us are many times. The lessons we have been taught at church, maybe at home by our parents, or maybe through our own study may have approached the ideas of loving one another and try to help us understand the meaning of that simple memory verse. They are simple words but it is NOT a simple verse. Actually, these words are some of the most difficult of words found in the entirety of Scripture. And there is a vast difference between understanding it and putting it into practice. And, I'm afraid while we may have heard it, learned it, maybe even like me memorized it, how we live it out is just as difficult today as it was for us when we first came across it.

One of the first "verses" that I learned at Sunday School was "God is love". In both my family and in my class, I learned that God is love and that God loves me....but not just me, God loves all of us. I remember that as a child, that was a hard concept for me. I didn't find everyone loving and my parents told me that I was to love everyone anyway. I remember that I really didn't like Terri very much because she always bit me. The reasons for these episodes didn't make it into my memories but I just remember that they were there and my Mother said I needed to love Terri no matter what. I had a very childish view of what love is. I thought it was a feeling – something warm and caring, as I felt when my parents or other family members held me close and said them to me. I had little understanding that the words "love one another" meant so much more than to just have good feelings toward each other. Even as a child, I knew that was something hard because there were people, well, lots of people that I just didn't have good feelings toward. There was Terri, Then, there was that man at church that yelled at my Daddy and made him go into his room and cry. There was that fellow on the street corner that I was afraid of because he looked so different. There were the people in the jail that I saw when I went with my parents to visit. I was afraid of them because they had done bad things and I didn't understand why. I just knew that there were lots of people or kinds of people that I didn't feel loving toward and yet I was told I needed to love them. That made no sense to me.

I later learned more and gained a better understanding. I learned that the word love is really a verb – an action word and a phrase that made more sense to me and helped put it into a better perspective was that we are to put forth the "Actions of love". That changed everything. I could think about those people that frightened me and know that I needed to act kindly toward them. I should do caring things for them and show compassion. My parents helped me with this. For instance, I remember my Mom and I baking cookies and then taking them to various people around us – most who were in some sort of need

but many of whom I was somewhat frightened. But their smiles quickly showed me that they were no different from me and that a small gesture of kindness – an action of love – changed the dynamic. I also remember our weekly visits to the local nursing home and my taking things I had made or prepared to give out. I remember my fear the first time I went and my eagerness to do so on the following visits because of the way I had been received. All the while I was being taught a valuable life lesson – that if we will take the step forward to show kindness and love to others, even those of whom we are afraid, or those who are different, or even those for whom we harbor hard feelings, putting forth those actions of love give the opportunity for the feelings of love to follow. We learn a bit more about God's love for us when we do.

It is only when we have experienced love from others that we can begin to comprehend the love that God tells us God has for us. To never love others or someone else deeply, diminishes our ability to understand God's love to us. We understand love because of the love that has been shown to us. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. We may not understand God's love because of the love that may not have been shown to us. I John 4 tells us we know God because of the love we have both for and from others. God inhabits love, as it were. But it is more than that. We are told that because we are so loved by God, we are to love one another as a response.

But what does it mean to love one another from a more mature perspective? Is it words to say as you part from those that are dear to you? "I love you", as you walk out the door – a kind of phrase that says "you are important to me." (Phileo) Is it something you feel for another person – an intimate, physical love that involves sexual expression? (eros) What about how we are in a church family – the love we share together.(Agape) I was reading recently a pastor's column in a church newsletter. In it, the pastor wrote about the love that was evident as the church had some difficult discussions together about new ways of worship. Is that what this means? Showing kindness and loving actions even when there is disagreement on issues? What about long-term friendships? Some of you have lived in this area for a number of years and have many long and dear friends with whom you have shared life's experiences. Is that it? If truth were told, I'm sure each of us can remember a time when "loving feelings" were not the emotion of the moment. Maybe someone else was the cause of it or even, possibly we were. Still, the relationships withstood these tests because one of the relationship members was able to show actions of love and the opportunity was there for God's love to be reignited and the feelings rekindled.

Jump forward from what I told you about the little girl Terri about 14 years and you find Terri entering my life again. I show up as a freshman moving into my college dormitory and who should live across the hall from me but this same girl from my past. Instead of biting, our activities this time were a bit more mature as we experienced college life and entering adulthood together all 4 years. She was actually in our wedding and we still keep in touch on Facebook. We had learned a bit more about love – that it required the actions of love for it to be a real relationship.

Yes, it is all of those and more. How we treat others is direct evidence of how we understand God's love for us, possibly even evidence of how much love we allow ourselves to receive from God. Because loving someone causes something to happen in us – we have to allow ourselves to become vulnerable to that person or group in order to get close enough to really love them. There are some of us who guard ourselves so closely that we are unwilling to become vulnerable to others and in turn we miss opportunities for a deeper relationship with others and yes, even God. We don't mind loving someone if it is easy and doesn't require much effort of us. We are good at loving one another when it is pleasant and if the people are easy to love. That may not always be said of us when the task is difficult, requires effort or when the people are those who disagree with us.

Some parts of the country just finished elections this week. Elections are to be a time when everyone holds to a position or candidate, votes their conscience and then hopefully, lets it all go when their candidate or issue fails. Local elections are hopefully not as emotionally charged as some of the national ones we have seen in recent years, but I would ask how well we "love one another" on the day after the election and if our cause or candidate failed? The actions we take and the emotions we exhibit tell a lot about us. Loving our brothers and sisters who are like us – how difficult is that? Loving a Republican or a Democrat – well, that may be another issue. Unfortunately, we are members of a very fractured national society that shouldn't be as it is. As a country, we seem to have lost to ability to participate in open, honest discourse. Giving another person respect enough to listen to their opinions, even those

dramatically different from ours, is something we are supposed to model from the way our country was set up. However, instead, we have let character assassination and innuendo become a major part of the electoral process leaving us with a government that is dysfunctional at best. We end up with lots of lost opportunities to come together over good things while instead towing party lines and not giving in on anything because we want our own way to the detriment of others. Where is that seen as a good thing? You can say that these things don't concern us or that we cannot change that kind of activity but I would politely but vehemently disagree. How we live our lives locally daily affects how our country acts. If you don't like that kind of activity, contact your representatives and say so...kindly. Remind them of their responsibility to you by working with all people in government. During the days leading up to and the days of the Government shutdown recently, I daily wrote to all the representatives from our state as well as the national leaders to let them know of my displeasure at their inability to work things out for the good of all people. I tried to kindly present my case and am almost certain that it did no good. However, I hope that there were others saying similar things and that collectively we could make a difference. So, back to my previous statement that how we live our lives locally can make a national difference if we will take the opportunity.

Showing God's love

What about the people who have never known God's love? Or possibly people who have not felt it for so long a time that they have forgotten it? Do you think there are people like that in the world? I do. People stricken with severe illness or debilitation, children of war, victims of abuse and violence, lives devoid of opportunities. Often when people deal with very difficult circumstances, wondering about God's very existence is a common reaction. I watched the people with whom we deal in Habitat for Humanity. Most of them did not have a church home but probably not for the reasons you may expect. It wasn't because they have too much to do on Sundays or that they don't like church. Many of them long for the relationships a church family offers but think that is for someone else, not them. In conversations with them and others living in the dire straits of poverty, I heard them respond when we say that the reason we were working with them – offering them the chance at home ownership – was because God loves them and doesn't want them to have to live like that. They hesitate, because they do not know of that love and they certainly never knew that God cared about their life like that. Or at least, they never felt that God did. Life had been so difficult for them that surely if there was a God, life would have been easier. If there is a God, God must not love them, because of how hard it had been when it seems that others have it so easy. Or we heard reasons for their not associating with a church to be that how could God love them when their situations are so desperate? Not only do they think that God has turned away from them, but some also feel that they must not be worthy in the first place. How very sad, especially since these are the ones that we as Christians should be working to help understand and be assured of God's love – not just because we have told them so, but because we have shown them so.

If I were to put my religious educator's hat on – my seminary degree is in Christian education – and ask all of you what topic is it that scripture has the most lessons on, what would you say? Love? That's good, but not the correct answer. What about tithing? Nope, not it. What about the 10 Commandments? Nada. Actually, the commandment that Jesus teaches is far greater than the 10. It is actually two – Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength and the second is Love your neighbor as yourself. But even so, that's not the right answer.

The topic that is taught more often than any other lesson – and found in both the Old and New Testaments – is about how we are to treat the poor, those who are the bottom ones in our society, those who are the least among us. Those who are without possessions, friends, family, position or status. In most passages, there is not even a comment about how they got into the situation – you know, like those who should just pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Or maybe, those who got there because of their own actions of alcohol or drug abuse. Those cases are different right? Not so. We are taught in scripture that compassion to those in need – however they got there, whatever their circumstances, is directly related to our faith. We are taught to be generous, kind and benevolent to our brothers and sisters who have need of us not qualifying that compassion by the attitudes exhibited by the people, how they act, or even if they believe in God, especially if they don't believe in God. These would be the ones that would need to see and know of God's love exhibited to them more than anyone

else. They need to understand that someone truly cares about their situation and their plight. Only then will they be able to accept our words that God loves them and offers them a life that is different.

You see, the love we receive from God is not for us to store up and become a vessel to contain and to use to make ourselves feel good. Instead, it is to be a catalyst for us to experience it and then to pass it on to others. In its truest sense, it is something that cannot be contained. It is our responsibility to pass it on to everyone, not just the ones we would like to pass it to. Scripture tells us that there is no reward for treating kindly people who treat us kindly. It is only when we respond to unkindness or difficult situations with actions that are motivated by love and compassion when instead the easy course of action would have been to engage in activities of default. We would treat people as unkindly as we think they treated us. Or we would react with venom to what we understand someone to say, or as in the case of the religious leaders in the story of the good Samaritan, pass by on the other side of the road so that we won't be bothered by being up close and personal to the needs of people that are around us. Instead, we are to be a channel of blessing for God's love to flow through.

To illustrate my point, let me ask you a question? Acts 1:8 clearly sets the church on a mission of spreading God's love to the world. However, it first starts at home. Are you aware that approximately 4000 of the 21,000 families in Anderson County live below the poverty line? These folks daily live with challenges that you and I do not understand. We should never be satisfied when choices in one's family are between utilities or rent; health care or food, yet it happens all the time. Parents lose jobs because of faulty and unreliable transportation – cars that are held together with chicken wire and a prayer. When they break down, there is no money for repairs and there goes the family's opportunity for getting ahead. Or what about when an illness comes? Paying for medications is not in the budget or staying home from work at your low-waged, hourly paying job because you are sick.

Outside of those families we can count as those living in poverty are those we cannot count who are living in poverty of spirit – those who because illness, isolation, loneliness – live in a state of sadness. These may be people with means but still are poverty-stricken. They were some that we also included in the Scriptures' admonishment to us. These are maybe a bit more difficult to find because they will sometimes live behind closed doors but are nonetheless needy of God's presence through the care of others.

What is it that we are to do? I am well aware of the wonderful ministries that this church performs and what it does for the community. What is it that you are doing that turns your focus from yourself or your family to the needs of others? My point is that for all of us, God's love has a personal responsibility...maybe the better phrase isa personal opportunity... to it. Because of the wonderful gifts and opportunities we have had offered us, our lives should be signifying our gratitude to God by the way we show love to others. An attitude of gratitude, if you will. If we look around us and see how very blessed we are and have been throughout our lives, it becomes pretty easy to be grateful, no matter where we find ourselves at the moment. We have much to be thankful for and many blessings to offer to others. And from the verses we read today, our actions should be so apparent that there is no question of the love we have received and have for others. What is it today that God would have you do? As we enter another holiday season what have you been thinking of that needs to be done or addressed? Realize that you may be the only one on whose heart God has laid that particular thing and is waiting for your response. Who do you need to show love to that may not have been so loving to you? What tasks or ministries do you need to involve yourself in? What personal activity might you need to consider giving up so that you can focus some attention upon the needs of others? Remember, others are watching and taking notes. To whom do you show love? How do you "love one another?"