

Past Sermons

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
The Venerable Pete Winder
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Salt Lake City
26 March 2006

Jesus tells us today, through those wonderful words of John, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life." So it is that early in his Gospel, John introduces his principle theme, which is God's love for us—"God so loved the world—" Later on in the Gospel, in the fifteenth chapter, John gives us the corollary to the primary theme, when Jesus tells his disciples, "These things I command you, that you love one another."

Notice that Jesus doesn't say "tolerate" one another—he doesn't say "accept" one another—he doesn't say "appreciate" one another—he says love one another. And I suspect that he said love, because the only power God sent to earth in Jesus was the power of his love. The only weapon Jesus ever used to win his way was love. So he lived, and so he taught, and in the end he imparted that same spirit to his disciples—to you and me. He made us know that as our lives reach out to love another, those others will be touched by the greatness of God.

We are able to do this - we are able to love others -because we know that we are first loved by God. And we are not loved because we keep his commandments, or because we are specially set apart—in fact, for no explainable reason at all—he just simply loves us—PERIOD. In some parts of scripture it says that, if we keep the commandments, God will love us. In other parts of scripture, it says that even if we don't keep the commandments, God will love us. That's the beauty of this relationship—no matter what we do, God cannot help but love us. But what does that really mean?

The Greek philosophers pondered love endlessly, and since our culture is Greco-Roman in part, we follow their understanding of love. First there is erotic, bodily love—then romantic, emotional love—then brotherly love—and finally detached, benevolent love. Notice that, the "higher" on the scale of love we get, the more refined and spiritual and gutless it gets! By the time we get to God, his love seems like heavenly well-wishing. But that is a washed-out picture of God's love as it is described in scripture. Since the Jews never became philosophers enough to split people into bodies and souls (thank God!), they were stuck with love as a human, bodily activity. Naturally, they imagined God's love along those same lines.

One of their images is from a pagan love song, the Song of Solomon, where God drinks in the people he loves from head to toe by way of hair, neck, breasts, belly thighs and ankles. That is how God lusts after those he loves.

God's most graphic avowal of love is perhaps when he says, (in the words of the prophet Ezekiel), "I found you abandoned in the desert, still bloody and slimy in your afterbirth; I washed you, clothed you in a white dress and married you." Notice that, while you and I are squeamish about love, God feels free to talk about sleeping with us.

But the most endearing Biblical image of God's constant, everyday love for us is the prophetic example of Hosea, who married a faithless whore to contrast God's faithful love. She was not satisfied at home, and kept returning to the village brothel. Each time, Hosea would go to town after her, bringing her back home through the narrow streets lined with neighbors laughing at him. But he kept doing it until she finally realized that he truly loved her, no matter what.

And that is how intensely God loves us. All lovers seem to pick out a special name for the one they love, as a sign of intimacy—names like darling, or sweetheart, or poopsie. God is no exception. Not finding a name he liked, he made one up—he calls us the "apple of his eye." And he whispered sweet nothings in our ears like, "I have called you by name—I have carved you in the palm of my hand—even if a mother forgets her child, I will never forget you." So Isaiah describes God's love for us.

Jesus is very discreet in speaking of love. He just does it! He walked and talked with people he loved; he ate and went to parties with them. He even ended up dying for them. Just imagine—Jesus actually loved us to death. People returned that love with a passion. They followed after him like lovesick puppies wherever he went. They remembered his every word. They hungered for a smile, or a nod—they even got well when he told them to. They loved him with all their being.

Somewhere between biblical times and our own times, we have in many ways become impotent. Our love for each other and for God lacks intensity and passion. And the more we talk about it and grunt over it, the less substance it has. Our shriveled humanity has shrunk our capacity for honest, earthy love. We need to be reminded that God not only loves us, he actually likes us. All of us! God likes us! In fact, the Father is very fond of us. We need to take God's love out of the spiritual context and put it back into the real world. Even though the world gyrates wildly off center, and nothing seems to fit, and everything seems senseless, can we imagine God with his back to the wall, wondering what to make of it all? No—God still holds the world in the palm of his hand. He knows how to take care of the apple of his eye.

But mostly we need to recall that real love is not heavy and dutiful and calculated—it is spontaneous and joyful and surprising. I recall an earthy, reckless, biblical notion of love portrayed in a play called Gideon, which had a short run on Broadway about 30 years ago. I'm embarrassed that I can't recall the author's name. Anyway—this Gideon lives in Manhattan, and he has had a wretched week culminating in a disastrous night, so he cries in desperation, "God, tell me that you love me!" So God (who is on stage with him) says, "Gideon, I love you." That felt so good that Gideon said, "Tell me again." So God repeats, "I love you, Gideon." Then Gideon scratches his head quizzically and asks,

"Why?" God scratches his head quizzically and answers, "I don't know—passion is irrational."

I think that all this means that God is passionately, head-over-heels insanely in love with us — all of us. So let it be. So let the ministry be in this place. Amen.