

God's Love For Us

6/18/17

Scriptures: Genesis 18: 1-15; 21: 1-7
Romans 5: 1-8

Today is Father's Day, and so we're celebrating the role our fathers play in each of our lives. If you were like me, your dad once seemed an awfully large person to you. Mine was 6'4", and had a shock of gray hair that stood up straight over his forehead. He seemed stern, but kind. He called me "Squeak," but as a little tyke I was scared of him. One word from him, and I'd stop whatever it was I was doing that irritated him or disappointed him about me. I so wanted his favor and his recognition, his approval, if you will. It wasn't till much later in my life that I came to realize I didn't have to work so hard to get his approval. I had it from before I ever knew it. He loved me as his son, just as I was, and not for what I thought he wanted me to be or become.

Dad showed his more tender side as he aged, as he mellowed out a bit himself. We could talk about things together that had seemed like they'd been off the table for any discussion years before. As he aged he developed a greater sense of his own vulnerability and mortality, and even discussed his beliefs about God and what comes after this life, at least a time or two. He died way too early, at age 68, and I've continued to develop a deeper sense of appreciation and love for him all these years since, particularly now that I'm a father and a grandfather myself. Why is it we seldom appreciate the people around us fully until they're gone?

Today is also the second Sunday of the season of Pentecost, in which we acknowledge and celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In our lesson from Romans, Chapter 5, verse 5, Paul writes: "...*God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*" He tries to explain how God's love for us is demonstrated in tangible form, and offered freely and graciously to us, regardless of what we've done to earn it. He makes three points to the early Christian congregation in Rome, that God loves us first, that God's love comes to us totally unmerited, and that it is a free gift of grace, unachieved and freely given. It's not that we as human beings have been so good and so worthy that we've earned God's love for us. Paul's point is exactly the opposite: it's in spite of our human nature and sinfulness and unworthiness that God loves us anyway. The initiative for this love comes from God, not from us.

This may be a concept we 21st Century Christians need to consider as much as did those early Roman Christians back in the First Century AD. We too tend to think that if we are good then God will love us. If we do the best we can, then God will find favor with us and reward us with his love. This is a conditional kind of love: "if... then." If we perform acceptably, then we get the desired reward. It works well in training animals. If the dog behaves, then she gets a doggie treat. It's used a lot with humans too, particularly with shaping children's behavior patterns. It's based on goals and rewards, or as they say

in the school systems, on achieving desired outcomes. Just read through your child or grandchild's report card. In many public elementary schools they just mark "Performs as expected;" "Exceeds expectation;" or "Needs improvement." If your kid gets all "as expected" or "exceeds expectations" then you have nothing to worry about. It's if you see a lot of those "Needs Improvements" on there that you schedule a special parent-teacher conference.

Conditional love is what we're most familiar with. It underlies much of our lives as American Christians, in school, at work, and even in our families. For many of us we can point to fathers who've used conditional methods to teach us how to behave. If we did our chores, then Dad gave us our allowance. If we got A's on our high school report cards, then Dad let us have the keys to the family car. If we performed as expected, then Dad's love was expressed to us. If we didn't, then there was going to be trouble.

Yes, this is how it works in many of our households, in many of our schools, and in many of our workplaces. It's may be an effective way of getting desired results. It has it's place in shaping behavior, to be sure. Yet it's different than how God relates to us or how God wants us to relate to each other. The point Paul was making to the Romans was that God is different than what we'd expect. In fact, God "exceeds expectations" in the love department. God's love for us is freely given, in spite of how we've behaved. God's love for us is not dependent on us or our actions. It's there for us from the very beginning, just because that's the way God is.

For the past three Sundays I've been teaching one of our June Term Adult Ed classes, focusing on the writings of authors like Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner, in describing the ins and outs and ups and downs of our personal journeys of faith. Buechner describes the seemingly random events and people whom we've loved in our lives as part of not just a journey through time, but a "*sacred journey*." In his book Wishful Thinking he tackles the subject of God's love for us, writing:

"Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.

"A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Heave you ever tried to love somebody?

"A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do.

*"The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you."*¹

Often times people in congregations I've served ask me: *"Why do we as Presbyterians baptize babies? Why don't we wait, like our Baptist friends, until the child is older, has gone through a confirmation process and can make an informed choice to seek baptism into the Church on their own? And why don't we Presbyterians have altar calls, like the Baptists do, and come forward at the end of our services to 'accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior?'"* Well, it's all because of our understanding of God's love for us. We Presbyterians do it the way we do because we believe that even before we could make a move toward God, God was there loving us already. It doesn't depend on the child understanding the significance of baptism. It doesn't depend on the adult making a choice for Christ. God already chose us, before we could even utter our first cry as a baby, or take our first step as a child. God's love for us comes to us as a gift, at God's initiative, not ours. Christ's life was offered on our behalf, not because we had done anything to deserve such a gift, but precisely because God loves us so much that God chose to give up his own Son for us.

"For while we were still weak," Paul writes in the lesson we read from Romans 5, *"at the right time Christ died for the ungodly... God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us."*

We should have known all along that this is the way God is. We should have known from stories like our Old Testament lesson today, that even in spite of age and infirmity, God chose Abraham and Sarah out of all the other possibilities of people to be the ones who would produce a Chosen People, that even though Abraham doubted God's promise and Sarah laughed derisively at the thought that she might conceive at her advanced age, God made it happen, just because that's how God wanted it to be. God looked past their inherent traits and abilities, past their qualifications or lack of them, and decided to bless them anyway. Why? Just because God wanted to, *that's why!* It might have had something to do with the fact that God loved them from the very beginning.

We have examples of this funny kind of loving, if we'd just stop a minute to think about them. We can see it in our parents, for example. Haven't any of us had a mother or father who just did things for us because they loved us, no strings attached? Mom prepared our favorite food, just because she knew what we liked and wanted to do something special for us. Dad came to our games, whether our team won or lost, rain or shine, just because he wanted to be supportive. And think of all the times they got up at night with us when we were babies, crying our heads off, and comforted us and rocked us and fed us and nurtured us, just because they loved us. It wasn't because we were doing anything to deserve their favor. It was simply because they loved us.

God's love for us is like that. We see in our parents, our mothers... our fathers, a reflection of this selfless kind of love God has for us. But God's love goes way beyond what any of us can reflect. It's poured out into our hearts by God like an overwhelming fountain of blessing, a gift given through the Holy Spirit which comes into our lives, not at our beck and call, but on God's time, at the *"right time,"* as Paul says, *"while we were still weak"* and helpless and vulnerable.

This is the meaning of grace, a concept which underlies our Christian faith. It underlies the nature of God's love for us, and without it we'd be wasting our time being good or trying to "meet expectations," because we never would succeed. If true love was something that had to be earned, if God's love was a commodity to be manipulated by our behaviors, if in the end it were all up to us to earn love, then all of us here would be in real trouble this morning.

And at one level, we are. On our own, there's no way we can measure up to the way we really ought to be. But if we could, then we'd have no need for fathers or mothers who love us just because we're their children, no need for friends who freely accept us as we are, no need for the support a church congregation can offer us, no need for lovers and spouses who see past our flaws and short-comings to live with us and cherish us for the particular people we are, no need for Jesus Christ, who gave his life for us not because we had obtained perfection, but because we were still in our weakness and sin in spite of our best intentions. We'd have no need for a God who loves us, because we'd have met or exceeded all expectations.

But just in case like me you still "need some improvement," just in case you know what it feels like to experience undeserved acceptance and freely given love, just in case deep down you know you're not in control of your life, yourself or your world, then rejoice with me today that ours is a God who loves us completely and showers us with unexpected blessings and lets us live in his grace, each and every day of our lives. This is the *good news* of the gospel, in Jesus Christ our Lord!

Thanks be to God! Amen.

1. Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, Harper & Row Publishers, c. 1973, pp. 33-34