

"The Great Depth of God's Love For Us"

For 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. [John 3:16]

THIS MORNING I'd like to ask you a serious question. Here's the question. Do you really comprehend the great depth of God's love for you--and for all human beings? Do you really understand, the strength and the persistence of that love?

The word "love" is much abused and diluted in our modern society. In common usage, the term "love" has come to be a wide umbrella, which people use to cover a vast array of human feelings and acts.

For example, when one speaks of "love" today, one could be talking, about anything from teenage infatuation, to the latest laundry detergent--which gets our clothes "whiter and brighter." At least that's what the ads claim.

We humans use that word "love," in ways which are often elusive and confusing. Yet, can we afford to be unclear about the kind of "love," which God has for us human beings?

Consider this parable. There once was a man who decided to love his neighbors. Eager to cultivate some new friends, this man showered his neighbors with attention, concern, and many small gifts.

Predictably, the man's neighbors responded with kindness to his many overtures. This was just what the man desired.

But over time, these relationships changed. As it happened, one of these neighbors began to challenge the man, over the precise location of a property line they shared in common.

Another neighbor didn't seem to care very much, that his

German Shepherd dug up the man's flower bed. And, another neighbor was overheard criticizing the way this man kept up his property.

The man was infuriated. He had worked very hard to be loving toward these people. But, now, to the bottom of his soul, he regretted his efforts to care for them. As this man bitterly complained to his wife, "They're all so ungrateful!"

Then, as abruptly as one turns off a spigot, this man turned off all his love for his neighbors. Instead of treating his neighbors with kindness and caring, this man was now completely indifferent towards them.

One day the neighbors returned home from work, to find that this man had installed a high wooden fence all around his property. And the single gate in that fence, had a lock which could only be opened from the inside.

Yes, this man did set out to love others. But we have to ask: what kind of love did he have? Was his "love" anything like the kind of "love" which God has for you and me?

Here's a vitally important question: When the going gets rough, does God's love build a huge wall of protection around itself? Does God's love build such a wall, and resolve never to risk or waste itself again, on people who might not appreciate, or deserve, that love?

This parable of the man who decided to love his neighbors, should be familiar to us all. It should be familiar, because our "human" way of loving others, can often be that shallow, that transparent, and that weak.

When we humans talk about "love," quite often, what we're really talking about, is a kind of social convention or business arrangement in which we expect to receive, exactly what we give--or, perhaps, even more--in return.

For example, we say to ourselves: we had our friends, the Whipples over for dinner last week. It's their turn to reciprocate. Before we call them again, let's wait and see if they invite us over to their house.

Many of our so-called "loves" in life amble on in that way--tit for tat, measure for measure. Such love and caring is not a solid commitment. It's not a passion. Rather, it functions as a kind of polite contract which we tentatively hold, with other people.

When we talk about "love," very often what we're really talking about, is a kind of self-interest. Consider, for example, the man in our parable again. He set out to love. But why did he do it?

We can imagine that, to a large extent, he did it, to satisfy his own ego.

We can ask: did this man really care about his neighbors--or, did he mostly care about himself?

IT'S NOT WRONG to enjoy the gratitude of others. But here's the danger. If we love, primarily to be loved, we are, in effect, only loving ourselves. There's a great difference between genuinely caring for others, and manipulating others so they will care about us.

It seems that many human loves are that transparent. They really are our own human needs and desires, projected upon others.

WHEN WE TALK about love, very often we are really talking about a kind of weak sentimentality.

We say that we "love" this or that person. But what happens when that other person wrongs us? Do we have the courage of true love? Do we have the courage to go to that other person, and share our hurt with them--with the hope that reconciliation can take place?

For the man in the parable, it was a lot easier to raise up a

tall fence, then to try to work out his concerns--face to face--with his neighbors.

Sentimentality is weak and flimsy. It usually opts to take the easy way out. In fact, many human loves drift on through life that way. With no depth of commitment, such loves are very prone to being turned into indifference, or even hatred, when they hit a "snag" in a relationship.

Yet, in sharp contrast to the man in the parable, how very deep is the love of our God.

The fact is, that God's love for us, is not just a social convention. It's not a matter of ego and self-interest. Neither is it a love, made up of weak sentimentality.

Rather, the love of God for us is a deep commitment. It's a product of that ever-flowing goodness which God is!

As human beings, we sometimes experience limits to our love. Yet, in sharp contrast to that, God's love is limit-less. God's love flows into our world continuously. And that wonderful love, even embraces some people, who, you and I might think are quite un-lovable.

As humans, we often seem inclined, to love only those people, who seem worthy of our love. However, God's love is radically different from that. God loves us humans, not because we deserve God's love, but because it is in God's nature to be loving.

In fact, God is ever reaching out to embrace all of us humans in God's love.

The ever-present cross in our world is this: not that our God fails to love us, but that so many of us humans, fail to perceive and accept God's great love for us.

The cross is a symbol of the world's pain. But we should always remember this: We humans created that cross. Yet, it was God's love, which willingly suffered on that cross

for us.

God's love for us is strong. That love is persistent. It is patient. It is ever-ready to forgive. In our Christian hymns, it is no accident that God is referred to as: the "Rock of Ages," "A Mighty Fortress," and "Immortal Love, Forever Full."

For so our God is--all of these things, and much more!

Today, on this 4th Sunday in Lent, we are drawing closer to the threshold of the most significant week in the entire history of our world. That week still ahead of us, called Holy Week, contains the most telling demonstration ever given, of God's great love for us humans.

That demonstration is evident on two different levels. First, there is the very fact of Jesus Christ.

Virtually all of us have grown up with the Christian story. We've heard about Jesus ever since we were young. But suppose you heard the story of Jesus' life, for the very first time today?

Prior to hearing his story, could you, in your wildest dreams, have ever imagined, that God would allow his own son to suffer--and so terribly as Jesus did on that first Good Friday?

I RECALL, YEARS AGO, taking my own 7 year-old son to the hospital. He sustained a minor scalp wound, when he fell backwards against a chair. Scalp wounds tend to bleed dramatically, which caused my young son to become nearly hysterical.

As my son Carl cried out in his fear, I distinctly recall that a strong feeling came over me. I fervently wished that somehow, I would be able to take my son's place, to spare him his trauma.

No doubt, many of you have experienced a similar feeling--when a loved one has been suffering greatly.

Knowing how we humans often react in such situations: could any of us have believed, that an all-powerful God, would not have saved his own son, from a cruel cross of death?

That Almighty God would allow his own son to die, and such a horrible death, completely defies our human logic. Yet, John's Gospel explains this act, succinctly and poignantly, with just a few words. As John wrote:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son..."

The nature of God's love for us is so deep, that it is even sacrificial. Sooner than abandon us humans to our own feeble devices in a world broken with sin, our God even denies his own being, his own son Jesus, so that we humans might be fulfilled through God.

Sacrificial love seems like such a rare commodity in our world, that it seems hard to believe, even when it does occur. Do you recall the famous, 19th century Roman Catholic priest named Damien, who devoted his life to ministering to the people in a leper colony in Hawaii?

Today, it is understood that this affliction--known as Hansen's disease--is not highly contagious. However, in Damien's day it was considered a great risk to be anywhere in the vicinity of a leper--never mind continually minister to them.

Father Damien was willing to risk his own life, for the sake of caring for those unfortunate souls--and bringing the gospel to them. But here's the irony.

Even the people closest to Damien--namely, his religious superiors--found it hard to accept Damien's self-sacrifice at face value. They wondered: was Damien suicidal, did he really want to die? Or perhaps, Damien was just trying to capture world attention and fame for himself?

After 12 years of faithful Christian service to those people with Hansen's disease, Damien contracted it himself and

died.

Father Damien's ministry made a great difference to the people in that leper colony.

Yet, why is it so hard, for us humans to believe in the genuineness of such self-giving, sacrificial love? In fact, Damien's dedication was really a reflection of the God he adored. It was a reflection of the God whose only son gave up his life on the cross, for the sake of us all.

The second demonstration of God's love in Holy Week, is seen in the character of Jesus Christ.

From the Palm Sunday gates to the tomb of Good Friday, we are presented with the continuing drama of God's great love meeting human weakness and betrayal.

Throughout that tragic week, Jesus faced: fumbling disciples, an insidious traitor, scheming religious leaders, and callous Roman officials. Jesus had plenty of cause to inflict scorn and revenge on all those figures. But Jesus didn't.

Instead, as Jesus lived out those last earthly days, Jesus chose the path of compassion and forgiveness. Consider this:

At the Last Supper: Jesus knew his disciples would all fall away from him--in his time, of great need. Even so, at that final meal together, Jesus still washed the feet of his disciples--as a sign of his own humility and willingness to serve.

In the Garden of Gethsemane: when the enemies of Jesus came to arrest him, there was a skirmish, in which one of the disciples cut off the ear of the High Priest's slave. Out of compassion, Jesus restored that wounded man's ear. And, Jesus rebuked his own disciple.

Around the Good Friday cross: there was a crowd which taunted Jesus saying,

He saved others; let him save himself...If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself! [Luke 23:35,37]

From the utter pain of the cross, Jesus did not revile his enemies, as they did him. Instead, Jesus prayed, saying,

Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. [Luke 23:34]

Even until his own tragic death: Jesus was persistent in showing, how very deep God's love is for us.

We couldn't ask for a more telling demonstration of God's great love, than was found in this Jesus of Nazareth. For in Jesus' very existence and character, the love of God was at work. That love was at work, seeking to reconcile our world--and all of us humans in it--to God.

How very, very deep is the love of God for us!

As the Apostle Paul put it:

Neither death...nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. [Romans 8:38,39]

When the going gets rough, God's love does not build a wall around itself. Instead, God's love reaches out even stronger, to embrace, each and every one of us.

This is a great Christian truth. It's a truth, which I think we all should reflect on as we move through this season of Lent and prepare our hearts and lives to pass through that most holy of all Christian weeks, which still lies ahead of us, beyond the Palm Sunday gate.

I'd like to bring my sermon to a close this morning, with a hymn, which I think expresses this great truth, so beautifully. I'm sure that most or all of you know this hymn well, even though Isaac Watts first wrote it, more than 300 years ago.

I'll read the words of that hymn, then invite you sing it with me. That hymn goes like this:

When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of
glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on
all my pride,
Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death
of Christ, My God,
All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them
to his blood.

See, from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love
flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so
rich a crown?
Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present
far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my
all.

Please stand and join me now in singing that special hymn,
"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." It is number 202 in our
hymnal.