

About a year ago I was taking a class at Alliance Theological Seminary in Nyack, NY. During a break climbed up to a vista on the Palisades – the cliffs overlooking the Hudson River. The class I was taking was part of the D.Min. program I was in and dealt with a lot of deep-level heart issues. It surfaced how I tend to struggle with the love of God. I knew that God loved me but didn't always know it deep in my heart. I thought my problem was that I struggled with receiving the love of God. However as I stood on the Palisades, overlooking the river, with wild flowers around me, feeling the breeze, I realized that I was receiving the love of God. And then I felt God say to me that my problem was not in receiving his love but appropriating it. I was not allowing God's love to truly transform me.

I want to talk about God's love for us this morning.

Now, what's the biggest question people ask about God? Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever asked some of those questions? I think some of the most frequently asked questions might be:

- Does God exist?
- Where did the universe come from?
- If God is good, why is there evil?
- Why did _____ happen to me?
- Does life have any meaning?

Those are good and valid questions that often get asked. However, I believe there is a question beneath those questions - it is the real question: Does God really love me? That's the question, I believe, we all really want to know. The God-shaped whole in each of us cries out for the answer to that question. There is a quote, at times attributed to St. Augustine and other times to G.K. Chesterton, that states, "*The young man who rings the bell at the brothel is unconsciously looking for God.*" Though human beings often look for it in all the wrong places, the love of God is what they're looking for. Human beings were made for love – made to be loved and to love and so we long to know whether or not we are ultimately loved.

Now here, sitting in these pews on a Sunday morning, we believe we know the answer. We can even sing it: "*Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong. They are weak but He is strong. Yes Jesus loves me. Yes Jesus loves me. Yes Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.*"

Now, it seems to me, that the truth of that song is not something we believe or don't believe. We believe it in degrees. We mostly believe it (often believe it, try to believe it, on good days believe it ... to a certain extent). But what if we really believed it? What if we believed it deeply and profoundly and assuredly? It would transform us. It would free us.

Does God really love you? Or is God's love simply stuff that preachers talk about to make you feel better about life? Is God's love simply the stuff of hymns? Is God's love merely stuff we tell our kids so that they will hopefully turn out to be well-balanced? Is all this talk about God's personal love simply, as Marx suggested, an opiate of the masses? Or is it true that the God, who created and sustains the universe by His Word, really loves you?

- How many of you believe, fully with your minds and deep in your hearts that you are loved by God – “*not merely pitied,*” as Lewis puts it, “*but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a [child]*”? Are you convinced that God loves you like that?
- If you struggle with answering that question or if you answer it in degrees or if you answer it with conditions (*If I do _____ then God will love me*), let me ask you this: Do you believe God’s Word? Do you believe that the Bible is true in what it says? If you believe the Bible with all your heart, then believing, with all your heart, God’s love for you must follow.

The Bible clearly teaches God’s love for us. And so we can know that God really loves us because:

1. **It is God’s very nature to love.** God is love. That is what Scripture reveals: God is love. Love is an essential attribute of God - it is a core characteristic. God operates out of love.
 - Now, I want to be careful not to equate love and God – to say that love is God (as we perceive love in our culture). We can’t make up a definition of love and then try to force God to fit into it.
 - God defines what love is. If we want to know love, we must know God. That’s why John writes, “...love is from God”. God is the source of true love.
 - And so, it is God’s very nature to love. And therefore, as David Jackman reminds us, “*to imagine that God does not love us is to deny his true nature, to repudiate his character.*” He goes on, “*It is to distort the free grace of God into something much less worthy, a conditional ‘love’ that depends on the attractiveness or worthiness of the object for it to be exercised. Divine love (agape) is utterly different. It cannot be earned; it is not deserved. God loves us because that is his nature.*” God chooses to love us.
 - A number of years ago while on a mission trip in Appalachia I was at a church where I was invited to give my testimony. My children were little at the time and so I shared how my children were teaching me about the love of God. Children, at that age, spend a lot of time dirtying diapers, spitting up and keeping parents from sleeping. On the surface little children do not always do things that necessarily endear themselves to us. Why then do I love my children so much? Simply because they are mine. They belong to me. I am their father and they are my kids. And because of that I love them.
 - God’s love is similar. He loves us simply because he does.

“OK,” you might say, “but what about sin? Doesn’t God hate sin?” Yes. God hates sin. But we need to ask: what is God’s approach to sin? What do we find in Scripture? Does God, in His hatred of sin, look in disdain on sinners and turn away from them? Is that what God did with you?

God’s approach to sin is to confront it in order to redeem sinners. Yes God’s judgment is real and is coming, but until the end, He redeems. God is love.

2. And we can know that God really loves us because: **God has proven His love for us in the cross of Christ.** Our passage states, ⁹*In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might*

live through him. ¹⁰*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

- God's has shown His love to us in this: God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through Him. As John expressed in his Gospel, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send this Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.*" God sent Jesus so that we could have life in Him; that we might live through Him.
- God did not turn away from sinners in disgust but moved toward us, bringing his redemptive presence in Christ. God has shown his love to us, God has proven his love to us in Jesus.
- "The issue of your value was settled at the cross" (Rob Reimer). The issue of your value is not settled at the car dealer or the real estate office or the mall or in front of a mirror. The issue of your value was settled at the cross. God has proven his love to us in Jesus Christ.
- God's love is not a result of our love for God. "*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*" We love b/c God first loved us.
- And God's love is so great that he sent Jesus to be the propitiation (the atoning sacrifice for our sins). God's wrath toward Sin, God's justice in response to sin was satisfied in the sacrifice of Christ. God's holiness demanded that sin not simply be swept under the rug, it had to be dealt with.
 - We often shy away from the wrath of God, but most of us do not really want a God who does not get angry at wrongdoing. When we read of human trafficking, the abuse and sexual exploitation of children, boys being turned into child soldiers etc. we would be horrified by a God who was not angered by that. We want a God of wrath who will make all things right.
 - And God is a God of wrath because He is a God of love. God's wrath is fierce because His love is even more so.
- Because of God's hatred of sin and love for us, the Father sent the Son to deliver us. And in that deliverance, God demonstrated His love for us - so we could see God's love, hear God's love, feel God's love, know God's love.
- "The issue of your value was settled at the cross."

3. And, finally, we can know that God really loves us because: **God has placed us in a community in which His love is shared and fulfilled.** ¹¹*Beloved, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* ¹²*No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

- It was Jean-Paul Sartre who wrote at the end of his play *No Exit*. "Hell is other people." Now living in the Hamptons, during the summer I'm sure some of you might be tempted to agree with Sartre. But God uses other people to communicate His love to us. God has placed us in the Church for us to love and be loved; for us to support others and be supported.
- Because God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. And because God so loves us, we are able to love one another. We are to reflect the character of the God who loves us and has redeemed us. We are to treat one another the way God has treated us – demonstrating a gracious love.

- And that love is powerful. John writes, “*No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*”
- How amazing is that? As we love one another, we display the love of God. As we love one another, God is present among us (*God lives in us and his love is made complete in us – perfected in us, fulfilled in us*).
- And that is why John instructs believers back in v. ⁷ *Beloved, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.* If we say we love God, we must love one another.
- Listen to pastor David Jackman ...

our love ...
 before. So God's love finds its completion by creating in us that same kind of self-giving love as his. It is a love that will send us into the world, as it sent his one and only Son, 'to give and not to count the cost'. It is a love that the hard-nosed cynicism of our late-twentieth-century society desperately needs to see, because it is the nearest many people will ever get to seeing the invisible God. The responsibility belongs to God's forgiven people. The church is his audiovisual presentation to a dying culture. People should be able to look at a Christian fellowship and see the God of love within his people. That is the goal God's love is working for, and for us to be content with anything less is to deny the gospel. If we know that God really loves us, let us allow that love to flow into and overflow from our lives. *Dear friends, ... we also ought to love one another.*

God is love. God has proven His love for us in the cross of Christ and by placing us in a community in which His love is shared and fulfilled.

And so we ask: Does God really love me? His answer is definitive: Yes! Yes! Yes!

Do you believe it? Will you receive it? Not in degrees, but will you really believe it – deeply, profoundly, assuredly?

Will you appropriate it and let it move you, motivate you, push you into action?

If you will, you will be transformed.

You are loved by God. Let that reality transform your life and set you free as a man, as a woman who knows the love of God, grows in the love of God and shows the love of God.