

Recipes of God's Love

I John 4:7-21

Whitefish UMC

May 10, 2009

- † “It’s Mother’s Day, an occasion that every preacher learns to respect.” When I was in seminary, one of my teachers remarked with disdain the fact that many more people attended church on Mother’s Day than they ever did during Holy Week, a fact that really troubled him.
- † So we were taught that since Mother’s Day isn’t a church holiday of any kind, we should not pander to its commercialism and pretend it didn’t exist in church. It didn’t take me long to ignore that advice.
- † Before Robert Fulghum was a best-selling author (you know—*All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, etc.), he was a preacher. And he remembers this:
“For twenty-five years of my life, the second Sunday of May was trouble....I was obliged in some way to address the subject of Mother’s Day. It could not be avoided....The congregation was quite open-minded and gave me free reign in the pulpit. But when it came to the second Sunday in May, the expectation was summarized in the words of one of the more outspoken women in the church: ‘I am bringing my mother to church on Sunday, Mother’s Day, Reverend, and you can talk about anything you want. But it had better include MOTHER, and it had better be good!’”
- † So with a considerable dose of performance anxiety, we begin—only to find that today’s scripture is about another subject fraught with potential pitfalls—LOVE. Mention love in this sanctuary, and there will be as many definitions as people, giving rise to conflicting emotions and ideas.
- † The Greeks thought that love was so complex they had to have three different words for it: *philos* for family love; *eros* for erotic love; and *agape* for divine love. Love is complicated, and never more so on Mother’s Day.
- † Anne Lamott describes a day at Stinson beach in California and the awkward feelings of love that she has for her mother. She looks at a photograph of that day at the beach and notices the gentleness on her face as she glances at her mother. “I sometimes feel this,” she says.
But I was only feeling this about half the time that day. The rest of the time I was annoyed. I was annoyed in general because she is not at all whom I would have picked....I would have chosen someone tall, elegant, and physical. I would have chosen someone with a ferocious belief in herself and God and me....
Specifically, I think I was annoyed that day because she acts so much older than she is. She is only seventy-three, but she staggers along in the sand like a toddler. I was annoyed because she had asked me once again if I had met anyone nice. I was also annoyed because dark pink lipstick was smeared on her front teeth...I was annoyed because we were waiting for my younger brother and my son to meet us at the beach for a picnic, and each time my brother’s name was mentioned, she acted like a Frank Sinatra fan...

Also, I secretly believed she could do better if she tried, that she acts this way to torture and control me. In my worst moments, I imagine her at home just before I pick her up, wearing a telephone headset and berating some commodities broker. Then when she hears me knock, she dashes to her bedroom, stashes the headset, pulls on a Ruth Buzzi cardigan, applies lipstick to her teeth, and totters to the front door to let me in.

On the beach I hold her hand and feel that my heart could break with love for her.”

- † Yes, love, especially when it comes to our mothers, is complicated. Which is why it is so important for us to pay attention to what the Bible says about it. Which reminds me of a joke:

One day God was looking down at earth and saw all of the selfish, unloving behavior that was going on. So God called one of the angels. “Go down to earth and find out what’s going on.” The angel returned and reported to God: “Yes, it’s bad on earth; 95% are misbehaving and only 5% are not.”

God thought for a moment, and then decided to get a second opinion. So a second angel was sent.

The angel returned and went directly to God. “Yes, it’s true. The World is in decline; 95% are misbehaving, but 5% are being loving, being unselfish.” God was not pleased. “I will send a e-mail to the five percent who are unselfish and loving. I want to encourage them, and help them keep going. The future of the world depends on them.”

Do you know what the e-mail said?

No?

You mean, you didn’t get that e-mail either?

- † Okay. Let’s turn to the beautiful passage that Ronica read. John the Elder, writing to a small community in Asia Minor, offers a simple answer to a complex question. How is it that we learn to love?
- † In the beginning, God created humankind, male and female, in God’s image. We were created from love, and meant to love God, the creation, and each other. John adds “Love is from God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God, for God is love.”
- † One preacher, Jon Walton, says: “Notice John doesn’t say the opposite. John doesn’t say love is God. Love is too complicated to say that. Much of our human love is fickle, after all, and confused with lust and desire and self-interest and loneliness, and a lot of other feelings that are not love, but something else.”
- † What John wants us to know is that we first learn how to love from God, and because God loves us, we ought to love one another. But our love often comes with strings attached, doesn’t it? We expect something back—at least I often do, even though I wish I didn’t.
- † That’s where that uncomfortable concept called sin comes in. Even though we wish we could, we can’t love as God loves without God’s help.
- † On Mother’s Day we remember our mothers, who often get credit for teaching us most of what we know about love. And when mothers love the way God intends for them to love, it’s is amazingly sweet. Sometimes the sacrificial love of a mother takes shape in poignant, unexpected ways.

- † The theologian Miroslav Volf tells a deeply personal story about the adoption of a three-month old baby boy. He and his wife took the baby to visit his birth mother and her 10-year old daughter, the baby's sister.
- † “The first thing I saw was a tear—a huge unforgettable tear in the big brown eyes of a ten-year-old girl. Then I saw tears in her mother's eyes. And in all their tears just enough joy was mixed with pain to underscore that pain's severity; their joy at seeing him, their three-month old brother and son, and their intense pain that it was the first time they'd seen him since he was just two days old, when they'd kissed him good-bye.”
- † Volf admits that though he was so grateful for the gift of his son, he still had a lingering negative view of a mother who would give up her baby, for any reason. It just didn't seem right. But during that meeting his mind was changed profoundly.
- † The child's birth mother handed him a letter she had written and asked Professor Volf to read it to the boy when he was older. “I did it for you,” she wrote to her child. “Someday you will understand.”
- † Volf observes: “She loved him for his own sake and therefore she would rather have suffered his absence if he flourished than to have enjoyed his presence if he languished. Now it was my turn to cry over the beauty and tragedy of her love.”
- † And so he saw a metaphor, a picture of the love of God upon which the whole Christian faith is built.
- † But of course, sometimes a mother's love isn't all it should be and inflicts pain that lasts for a lifetime. I just finished a memoir written by a Missoula woman whose mother alternated between being incredibly charismatic and inspiring or diabolically possessive and demeaning.
- † For this author, the sweet children's book, *The Runaway Bunny*, which I have used to illustrate the pursuing love of God in sermons and in Walk to Emmaus talks, instead portrayed how her mother stalked her with unhealthy, grasping, possession.
- † Some women can't bear the second Sunday of May because they cannot bear children, yet want to be a mother. Some have wanted their mother's love but never found it. Some of us have lost our mothers. Some mothers live in unspeakable conditions of poverty and abuse.
- † Almost all of us wish there were another opportunity to say something to heal our relationship with our mother, but we find we cannot. And many of us mothers wish we could do some things over with our children so we could get it right.
- † Maybe we have to settle sometimes for love expressed in ways that transcend words, that extend beyond time, that pass beyond distance.
- † In researching today's sermon, I found an article in the Chicago Tribune, my old hometown newspaper, that tells about a woman in New York, Anny Stern, who received a call from a woman who said, “I have a package for you from your mother.”
- † This came as a shock since Stern's mother, Mina Pachter, died in World War II of malnutrition in a concentration camp called Terezin. But here was this package from Mina Pachter that had somehow made it into the hands of her daughter after all these years. When Anny Stern opened the package, she discovered a collection

of recipes handwritten by her mother and the women of Terezin. She was so shaken that she put the book away for years, unable to look at it.

† Eventually, a reporter from a paper in New York wrote an article about the cookbook of Terezin recipes and arranged to have them translated and published, painstakingly edited by Bianca Steiner Brown, a former Terezin inmate who became an editor at *Gourmet* magazine.

† Finally, the Holocaust Museum hosted a luncheon at the Drake Hotel in Chicago that showcased some of these remarkable recipes.

“Imagine this,” the article explains,

...elderly gaunt women sitting around a bunk bed whispering in the dark, feeding themselves with memories of potato herring dishes, breast of goose and desserts made of rose hips. Imagine them jotting in ornate German script the secrets to chicken gelatin (“Take a large old hen, but do not scald her”) or directions for stuffed goose neck (“Sew the small side of the gooseneck [skin] together...”).

† Imagine these women huddled together imagining the lives they left behind; kitchens that smelled of cinnamon, tables draped in linen, families feasting on strudels and tortes and dumplings.

† Imagine them fortifying their souls with memories of preparing food and sharing food. Imagine them wishing what generations of women had before them, that they could pass on their recipes to their daughters.

† And then imagine them learning that their recipes survived the Holocaust even though they didn’t and that more than fifty years later, their food would come alive amid the crystal chandeliers and the gold velvet curtains of the Gold Coast Room [of the Drake Hotel]” The elegant meal finished with the thinnest sliver of dark chocolate torte, made from a recipe by Mina Pachter.

† As the people at the dinner where the recipes were showcased took their first bittersweet taste of Mina Pachter’s cake that evening, their host had this to say. Take the cookbook home. Put it on your kitchen shelf and look at the extraordinary mundaneness but wonderful mundaneness of your life, your kitchen. Choose one recipe, serve that dish, tell that story.

† The Psalm for today puts it this way:

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;

My vows I will pay before those who fear him.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied;

Those who seek him shall praise the Lord.

May your hearts live forever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;

and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.

To God, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;

Before God shall bow all who go down to the dust,

and I shall live for the Lord.

Posterity will serve him

- future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn
saying that he has done it.
- † What do we need most in the world? After our physical needs are satisfied, what is it that we most long for? When we're in trouble, when out of the blue we lose someone we love, the diagnosis comes back positive, our world collapses?
 - † What is it, that in the middle of the night when we can't sleep, you want the most? What is it that we need to hear? Of course there are many answers to that question, but it really comes down to needing to know that we are cared about, that we matter, that we are wanted, that we are loved.
 - † And that is what the love of Jesus Christ is all about. You are loved. And because of that, you are meant to put fear aside and love as we are meant to love—the way God loves us—with no strings attached.
 - † Love may be elusive, too slippery to get your hands around, too difficult to fully understand, even difficult to express, yet love which seeks not its own but gives itself away, that is love indeed. Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters ... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God in them.
 - † Happy Mother's Day.

Sources:

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