

Our Needs Are Holy To God: The Need to Love and Be Loved

John 13:34-5, I John 3:1

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Is there any need of children, and of us all, that comes more readily to mind than the need to love and be loved? The Bible is the story of love and of its history among us. Our needs are holy to God, and chief among them is love.

That love begins, as last week's sermon observed, with love as bread and water, warmth and rest, security and safety. And then it accompanies us all our days.

I

The first book of the Bible, first chapter, says that God made us in God's own image (Genesis 1:27). Theologians have debated through the years what this "image of God",

imago dei, is. Some have said, “rationality”, others have said, “the soul”. I think that the *imago dei*, at its heart, is *our capacity to love and be loved*.

The second creation story in Genesis 2 underlines this. God made Adam, then looked and said, “It is not good that man should be alone (Genesis 2:18). So God created Eve. She is described as his *ezer*, or companion, or “one corresponding to him”. Not as the translation has often been, “helper”. Aloneness is one of the most painful human experiences, for we “were not made to be alone”.

It is built into our D.N.A. to love. Anthropologists have unearthed the prehistoric skeleton of a man of older age with a leg that had been broken and repaired, and who was cared for into his latter years. He was not left to die! The community cared for him.

The human child is born with a crucial set of needs. One of them is love. Bonding with a parent in infancy is crucial to their well-being.

How does a child experience love? By being nursed and fed and held. But also this: in seeing the delight in the face of the parent.

Gordon Cosby once said, “It is the chief duty of a parent is to enjoy their children”. We do not usually associate the words “duty and “enjoy”, but in the raising of children *our duty is our delight*.

The delight parents take in their children conveys in ways deeper than words the experience of *grace*. To be sure, parents are also called to teach their children what is right. But before that, they take delight.

Of course, none of us have loved or been loved perfectly, or even well, And some almost none at all. One deep meaning of the gospel is that we have a God who loves us perfectly, a motherly/fatherly God Jesus called Abba. And this God takes delight in us and calls us the Beloved.

II

The English language is poorer for having only one word for love, and love means so many things.

The Greeks had four words for love:

1) *epithemia*, desire, the physical and emotional desire for another; 2) *eros*, the love of the beautiful, the good and the true that animates our lives; 3) *philia*, the sisterly/brotherly friendship kind of love; and 4) *agape*, the love of God for us and in us that pours itself out for others, a self-expending, self-sacrificial kind of love.

Reinhold Niebuhr divided love into two: “mutual love” (I’ll scratch your back if you’ll scratch mine) and “sacrificial love”. C.S. Lewis said there were two kinds of love, “need love” and “gift love”. Sometimes we love out of need, other times as sheer gift. Our needs are holy to God.

Frederick Buechner wrote of love:

The first stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love. The middle stage is to believe that there are many kinds of love and that the Greeks had a different word for each of them. The last stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love.¹

Finally, love is one, and love is all. As Emily Dickinson wrote:

That love is all there is

Is all we know of love.

III

The Bible tells that love has a history. It is there at our creation where we were blessed and called *tov*, good. It is there as God started a relationship with Israel. It's there in the Torah as God commanded us to the love of God and neighbor. It is there in the sensuous love poem, *The Song of Songs*. And it is there in the Incarnation as Love itself came to dwell with us.

Do you want to know what love is? You can look up its definition in a dictionary, but if you really want to see what love is look at the life of Jesus.

I see *four ways* Jesus embodied love. The first was in his relationship with God, his Abba, who took delight in him as the Beloved. Jesus came that we might all feel this delight and know ourselves as the Beloved.

Secondly, his love went out to all people. It transcended all boundaries we make between the “worthy” and the “unworthy”, the righteous and the sinner, the culturally esteemed and the unesteemed. Jesus’ love bestows worth and esteem. He ate and drank with the wrong people, and it was a scandal: tax-collectors, prostitutes and those named with a sneer, “sinners”. Children were considered “less than”, but Jesus scolded his disciples who tried to keep them away—“You have more important things to do Jesus!”—and gathered children to his side and held them in his arms and said, “It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

Thirdly, his love was forgiving and restoring. Witness his love and protection for the woman taken in adultery, or his parable of the Prodigal Son, where the father runs, runs to

welcome home his wandering, lost son and wraps him in his arms.

Fourthly his was a sacrificial self-expending love, not just on the cross, but all his life. There his love, poured out for others all his life, was poured out for us all on the cross. And that love made eloquent in suffering has been transforming lives ever since.

Near the end he gave his disciples a New Commandment:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples (John 13: 34-5).

Later the writer of I John looked over the miracle of the life of Jesus and said with wonder and amazement. Hey, look, he said:

See what love the Father has given us, love as if from another country, that we should be called children of God. And indeed we are! (I John 3:1)

IV

So how do we love our children as children of God? Yes, by providing for them. And yes, by taking delight in them, enjoying them, playing with them. And by spending yourself for them in self-expending love.

And in this: by receiving them as they *are*, not as who you might like them to be. Our dreams for our children can be crippling to them. They are not given to us to boost our self-esteem, to fulfil our dreams.

Let's think about the church as it welcomes all children in all their glorious diversity and variety of need. There's a new word I like being used today for those with different ways of mental functioning. The word is *neurodiverse*. We are all part of a neurodiverse humanity. As we welcome neurodiverse children, like those on the autism spectrum or those with dyslexia, we learn better how to welcome all children.

An early mentor of mine was R.F. Smith, then pastor of First Baptist Church, Durham. He gave me my first ministry job as youth minister there. He was a wonderful preacher, minister, man, and he was a magnificent father. He had a tradition in the home. When he was seated in a particular comfortable chair his children, Becky, Forrest and Rachael could come and sit on his lap, or by his side, and say

anything on their minds or ask anything they needed to ask, and he would receive it with love, and they had no fear of disapproval or punishment.

That has struck with me. I have tried, not always successfully, or often enough, to make of my heart that kind of chair for my children, where they could come without fear and say what they most needed to say.

The church can be that kind of place, where children are cherished and welcomed, where they can say what is on their minds or ask what they need to ask without fear, and be loved.

V

Now what about us older folk, and our need to love and be loved? Can we start here by saying something honest? *We all are lousy at love.* We are like the sad clown at the circus

trying to love without words, but our feet are too big and our miming gestures can't quite get the message across. A tear runs down our face.

But we all need to love and be loved. There is our need for human intimacy. There is our need for abiding friendship. Judith Viorst once described friendship as “comforting and exuberant, sacred and miraculous connection.” And we need the kind of love the Hebrew Scriptures called *hesed*, or steadfast love, the never-giving-up-no-matter-what kind of love, what Joni Mitchell called “love that sticks around”. Of course, we can only approximate such love, and we often fail at it. But we, with God, keep trying to love like that.

Church is a laboratory of love where we learn to give such love and receive it. It is a place, in other words, where our hearts grow bigger and bigger.

Like the Grinch in Dr. Seuss' *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. After all his efforts to steal it he looked at the love that came down at Christmas and filled people's hearts. And this is what happened:

Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!

"Maybe Christmas", he thought, "*doesn't* come from a store.

Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"

And "what happened *then*?" And what happened *then*, the story asks?

Well...in *Who*-ville they say
that the Grinch's small heart
Grew three sizes that day!²

I think Paul had something like this in mind, our *hearts*
in mind, when he offered this prayer:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from
whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,
that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you
to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the
inner person, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts
through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in
love, may have the power to comprehend with all the
saints what is the breadth and length and height and
depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses

knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God (Ephesians 3:14-19).

That is what makes our hearts grow sizes. And his prayer is my prayer for myself and for us all today

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p.53.
2. Dr. Seuss, *Seuss-isms: A Guide to Life for Those Just Starting Out...and Those Already On Their Way*. (N.Y.: Random House, 2015)