

BY THIS WE KNOW

I John 4: 7-21 & John 15: 1-8
04/28/24 Dean Feldmeyer

WHAT'S A MOM WORTH?

How do we know that our parents love us? How do we know that we, as parents, love our children?

Every year about this time, as Mother's Day and Father's Day approach, someone decides that the only way to measure a stay-at-home mom's love for her family is to place a monetary value on the work she does.

A few years ago, the gauntlet has been taken up by Insure.com ("The #1 Resource for Insurance.") They took "an informal look" at an "assortment of common tasks" that moms usually do around the house and what it would cost if the family had to pay someone to do those chores. Turns out moms got a pay cut this year.

Insure.com said that, according to data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, a mom is worth about \$61,436 a year to that average family. (Down about 2% from the previous year.)

Dads, on the other hand, are worth only about \$20,415. Dads are "fungible." (Replaceable.)

It isn't so much the amount of money that gives me pause, here. It's the assertion that the only way to measure the value of a parent's love is to place a dollar amount on it.

But how do we measure love? And especially, how do we measure God's love for us and our love for God? And how do we measure our love for each other? How do we know if the love we feel or claim to feel is real or not?

Ask most people and they will tell you that it has to do with feelings. The measure of love's authenticity is to be found in the strength of the feeling. If you feel the love – of God for you, of you for God, of you for your spouse or your children – if you feel that love really, really strongly, it must be authentic. And the depth of the feeling will tell you just how real the love is.

John, the author of the gospel and, some say, the three epistles, one of which we heard from this morning, has a different idea. But we'll come to that in a minute.

First, let's look at how our popular culture measures love.

TWO POPULAR BOOKS

I think we can best answer that question by consulting the best seller list.

Not long ago, two books on this subject were all the rage in popular culture. One made a direct attempt to answer that question; the other comes at it from an oblique angle.

In *When God Talks Back*, anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann examines what she calls “the American Evangelical relationship with God.”

Luhrmann spent six months in Vineyard Fellowship churches in Chicago and Los Angeles, attending worship services and classes, and interviewing people about their relationship with God and how they came to that relationship. Vineyard churches, she says, are very experientially oriented. That is, they encourage their members to seek not just “knowledge about” God but an “experience of” God as well. In fact, Vineyard churches began as what was then classified as “seeker friendly,” churches. People came to them seeking something new and different from what traditional churches were offering and Vineyard churches offered a process for helping people through the seeking process.

When people come to the Vineyard churches seeking an experience of God they usually begin the process in the large, plenary worship service. After a while they are encouraged to join a small group or class where they are taught to use their imagination to create settings where they are present with and talking with God. They “have coffee” with God or “take walks” with God, or “just chat” with God.

At the same time, they are taught that God loves them unconditionally and wants only good for them. Eventually, after following this contemporary spin on traditional spiritual disciplines, Luhrmann says, “they start to say that they recognize God’s voice the way they recognize their mom’s voice on the phone.” Borrowing a concept from C.S. Lewis, they “pretend” that it is real until it becomes real. They imagine the close, personal, intimate relationship with God into being.

But, when pressed by Terry Gross on NPR’s “Fresh Air” interview program, Luhrmann could not, of course, provide proof that what these very sincere folks are hearing was, in fact, the voice of God and not just their own voices reflected in their imaginations.

They feel very strongly that the voice they are hearing is God’s. They feel it so strongly that they are convinced. But it is still very subjective. It is a feeling. A very, very strong feeling, to be sure. But a feeling.

The second book to which I want to draw your attention is the best-selling novel and subsequent movie, *The Hunger Games* and all of the sequels and prequels that have been spun off from the original. In it, author Suzanne Collins warns us of future in which “reality TV” has gone completely off the rails.

In Panem, the futuristic country that used to be North America, people watch the “Hunger Games” on television. In a plot that borrows liberally from Richard Connell’s short story, “The Most Dangerous Game,” and Stephen King’s Richard Bachman novel, *The Running Man*, this story features a futuristic reality show that pits twenty-four teenagers against each other in a gruesome, televised competition that leaves only one alive at the end of the game. Desperately poor and hungry, these teens kill each other off in a bid to live the rest of their lives in luxurious comfort.

As the story opens twelve-year-old Prim Everdeen is chosen by lot as a contestant in the games. But Prim is shy and frail and her older sister, Katniss, who is clever, strong and skilled with the bow-and-arrow volunteers to take her place. For Katniss, love is something you do, it is measured in your willingness to sacrifice on behalf of the beloved.

WHAT JOHN SAYS

The author of the First Epistle of John would probably see more of God's love at work in *The Hunger Games* than in *When God Talks Back*.

John believes in an experiential faith, too. But the experience he commends to us is much more prosaic and mundane than the one described in *When God Talks Back*. It doesn't involve imagining or pretending so much as it involves doing.

For him, the love of God is about much more than feelings. It is as much objective as it is subjective. It is measurable. The most repeated phrase in I John is "by this we know." John is all about knowing God and God's love in an objective, measurable way.

Do you want to experience God's Spirit? Do you want to experience God's love? There is a way you can do that: Love your neighbor. Blanket your human relationships in love. Let love be your way of moving and being. To the degree that we do that, we will experience God's presence and love in our lives.

Do you want to abide in God? You can. Abide in love.

And by this we know that we love – by the fatigue we feel at the end of the day, by the thickness of our callouses, by the ache in our muscles and by the sweat on our brow. The measure of our love is counted in energy spent. For John, living in God's love is not about having coffee with God, or snuggling with God, or chatting with God, or taking a walk with God. It isn't about imagining or pretending a relationship with God into existence. It is about making a decision and acting on it even if... especially if... that decision calls for personal sacrifice on behalf of another. It is about deciding to love one another in real and concrete ways.

In fact, he tells us in verse 16 that "those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them. You just don't get any closer to God than that.

In his gospel, John makes the same point. Let me read briefly from it:

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower.²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes* to make it bear more fruit.³You have already been cleansed* by the word that I have spoken to you.⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers;

such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. (John 5: 1-8)*

John doesn't leave it to us to figure out what the most important phrase is in that passage. He repeats it in one way or another six times. And that phrase is "bear fruit."

John is very clear: Living in and knowing Jesus Christ in a close personal way has very little to do with feelings and much to do with bearing fruit. Life lived according to the gospel bears fruit, much fruit and good fruit. It is productive living. And, according to the scriptures, these are some of the fruits that it bears: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

Again, it is measurable.

As Ross Marrs, the pastor who confirmed me in the faith was fond of saying, "The Bible says that we are not to judge one another, but it also says that we are all licensed fruit inspectors."

A MODERN HERESY

One of the most common and seductive heresies alive in the church today is the "personal relationship with God." That is not to say that a personal relationship with God is not possible or desirable; it is both.

The problem, the heresy, comes when we believe and practice that, that's all there is to Christianity. When we reduce God to little more than "my big spiritual buddy," we have left out a great deal of what scripture teaches us about the nature and being of the Divine Creator.

When we treat God as our personal therapist, a shoulder to cry on, an ear to bend when life is not going the way we want it to go, and a miracle worker upon whom we call whenever we need something, we are treating God like a personal servant, a cosmic Mr. Belvedere, a spiritual Jeeves.

Moses may have spoken with God "as a man speaks to his friend," but that wasn't all there was to the relationship.

When we are looking for a model to guide us in our relationship with God we would do well to turn to Jesus. Let him be our role model. Let him be our guide as we seek to know God.

Jesus calls God, "Abba." Father.

The appropriate relationship with God which he models for us is personal, yes, but it is also parental.

Sometimes we come to God crying about a boobo, about hurt feelings, about personal failures or problems, about problematic relationships or conflicts with other people. Sometimes we go to God because we need reassurance, or a sympathetic ear, or a shoulder to cry on. Fine. But let's be careful that we don't just let it go at that.

Because sometimes we come before God to be held accountable, to be corrected, and to ask forgiveness.

Sometimes we come before God to be reminded about who and whose we are.

Sometimes the voice of God is a mother's voice, soothing and comforting. But sometimes the voice of God is a prophet's voice, instructing, and correcting, and commanding.

God has given us a commandment, to love one another, and John makes it clear in his Gospel that our faithfulness to that commandment is measured in the amount and quality of the fruit we bear. And he also tells us in his first epistle, that obeying this commandment is the way we best come to know God.

How do we know that our love is authentic? How do we know that God loves us? How do we really know? Really?

By this we know, brothers and sisters, that God lives in us and his love is perfected in us: That we love one another.

And how do we know that the love we feel and show is authentic? By this we know: That it bears much fruit and the fruit that it bears is good

AMEN