

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, May 19, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“LOVE IN PERSON”

John 21:15-17

Jesus was once asked, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” He replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” Do you find that a rather difficult commandment? Do you find it hard to really love God? Well, many of us do. Perhaps that’s because we feel a distance between God and ourselves. God is great and we seem so small; God is holy, holy, holy and we are sinners. There seems to be a large gap between ourselves and God. So loving God does not come easily or naturally to us. God knows that. He knows that love can be commanded, but it can’t be demanded. Love that is not freely given is not really love. Now God doesn’t wring love out of us like you wring water out of a sponge. God does not force us to love him. God loves us into loving him. God does not coerce our love; God wins our love. It’s true between humans. Sometimes you hear a woman say, “Well, I didn’t love him when we first started dating. It wasn’t love at first sight. But over time my love for him started to grow.” What happened was that the man won her love through a combination of kindness, good character, roses and chocolates, so that love grew into an enduring marriage.

John 21. Simon Peter and six disciples were back in Galilee, some days after Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus had promised to meet them in that place where they had spent so many happy and adventurous days. While they were waiting Peter said, “I’m going fishing.” And the others joined him. Why not? They had been fisherman. And they were hungry. But that night they caught nothing. Suddenly in the early morning light they caught sight of a stranger on the shore. He told them to cast their net on the right side, and when they did they caught so many fish they were hardly able to drag them in. That reminded them of something that had happened once before. Now they knew that it was Jesus on the shore. Peter plunged into the sea leaving the others to haul in the heavy net. And when they all reached the shore, they found that Jesus was cooking breakfast for them over a charcoal fire.

After breakfast, Jesus took Peter aside and asked him three times if he loved him. Three times Simon Peter said, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” Peter was fulfilling the commandment to love the Lord with all his being. We can be sure that his answer came right from the heart. And we too can come to say, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” For remember this – God does not coerce our love; God wins our love. And here’s how. There are two main ways.

*First, by showing his love to us in person.*

Now there are several reasons for the incarnation, why God came to us in the human person of his Son. But one reason is because we can relate to a person and really love a person. Now we

might say, "I love my big screen TV," and I do love mine, especially for sports. Or "I love golfing" or "I love my car" or "I love my cottage." These things can provide us much enjoyment. But they do not love us back. There is no personal relationship. True love happens between persons who can relate to and respond to one another. Now God is not a thing - God is eternal, living Spirit. But he knows that we can best relate to him in a person. So God's incarnation in Jesus covers the gap between the great and holy God and humans. God's coming to us Jesus in a person brings God close to us, in a person we can relate to.

A scientist was studying a colony of ants. She came to admire those industrious little creatures as she watched them work. She meant them no harm; in fact, she would have helped them if they needed it. But whenever her shadow passed over the ant colony, the ants scurried in fear. The scientist wondered how she could communicate her care for them. She realized that the only way would be if she became an ant herself and spoke to them in their own language. That was impossible of course, but it gave her insight into the incarnation. Humans cannot become ants, but God could and did become human. "The word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." Coming to us in the person of Jesus brings God out of the shadows and brings him down to earth.

God draws near in the person of Jesus to overcome our fear of him. As Scripture says, "Perfect love casts out fear." And we can love someone who loves us as Jesus does. Right from childhood we sense that Jesus is someone whom we can love, because he loves us. "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." And the truth is that when we say to Jesus, "Yes Lord, you know I love you," we are in truth loving God. For Jesus is God in human form. To love Jesus is to love God. God comes to us in Jesus, not to compel us to love him, but to win our love.

*The second way God wins our love is through his loving deeds on our behalf.* The reading today speaks of several of these loving deeds.

One is that he comes to help us in our time of need.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples didn't know it was him. The disciples had caught nothing. When Jesus asked them if they had any fish they sadly said "No." He told them to cast the net on the right side of the boat. The catch was tremendous – 153 large fish. Jesus turned the disappointing night into a surprising success. But just the fact that Jesus was there at daybreak was an act of love. Through Jesus God always brings us a new day, full of hope. He brings new possibilities. He turns our defeats into occasions of grace. He transforms our disappointments into opportunities. In our weakness and fear he brings us strength and courage.

Just after eight A.M., an elderly gentleman showed up at the doctor's office to have some stitches removed from his thumb. He told the nurse that he was in a hurry because he had an important appointment at 9 that morning and he must not be late. They had him take a seat, knowing it would be over an hour before anyone would be able to see him. The nurse noticed that the man kept looking at his watch urgently... and she decided to help him. She looked at his thumb and saw that it was healing well. The doctor told her to remove his stitches and to re-dress his thumb. She said to the man, "So you have an urgent appointment at 9 this morning?" "Yes," he said, "the same appointment I have every morning. Every morning at 9 A.M. I go to the

nursing home to have breakfast with my wife.” The nurse smiled and said, “You are such a handsome gentleman. I bet that’s the highlight of her day.” The man replied, “She doesn’t know who I am... She has Alzheimer’s. She hasn’t recognized me in the last five years.” Surprised, the nurse said, “And you still go every morning?” The man smiled, patted the nurse’s hand and said, “She might not know who I am, but I know who she is.” So it is with God in Christ. He knows us and draws near even when we don’t recognize him. He comes to us bringing a new day and new hope. It is an act of love.

Here’s another loving deed by which God shows his love for us. In Jesus he feeds us.

On the shore Jesus cooked breakfast of bread and fish. God is not indifferent to our physical needs. God has created a wonderful world which can meet the needs of all. Just consider that marvelous catch of fish. There really is enough for everyone. I read recently that the number of poor in the world, at least desperately poor and hungry, has gone down significantly over the last generation or so. God must be very pleased when all people have a sufficient share in God’s bounty. And while there is still much to do, the Christian Church acting in the name of Jesus has played a significant role in this progress. The Lord provides bountifully for human physical need and gives us opportunities to share our bread.

But God feeds us in another way, too. Through his Word God feeds our souls. Jesus said “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and who ever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Both Scripture and sacrament speak of God’s great love for us, that while we were still sinners Christ suffered and died for us. God loves us so much that he gave his only Son to redeem us from the power of sin and evil and death and bring us to eternal life.

A missionary told how he and some fellow Christians travelled up a river to an isolated village. They shared gifts and played games with the people there. Finally, the village leader asked the missionary why he and his friends had come. This missionary shared with the villagers John 3:16. He concluded by saying, “We are here to share this story of God’s love with you.” One of the older and respected villagers asked, “Why has no one ever come and shared this story with us before? I am an old man. I never knew that there was a God who loves us. All my life I have felt like the gods were against us. I have spent most of my life trying to fool the gods. Why did you wait so long to bring us this message?” God wins our love by feeding our souls with his word of truth.

God also wins our love by his act of restoring us.

Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him. No doubt that reminded Peter of his three-fold denial. But three times Peter said, “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” And Jesus restored Peter to the leadership role he had given him at the beginning. Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” You see, God not only redeems us and forgives us, he restores us. He sets us on our feet again. By the Holy Spirit he sends us forth once more in to love and serve his people.

Someone once reminded Winston Churchill that as a child he had failed a grade in school and that made him unworthy to be Britain’s leader. Churchill replied that “he had never failed at

anything in his life; he was just given a second chance to get it right.” So God restores us in Christ and gives us a second chance. Peter made the most of the opportunity shepherding the early church. Peter loved Jesus so much that he wound up being crucified himself, but upside down because he didn’t feel worthy of being crucified in the same position as his Lord.

How do we get to the point of saying, “Yes Lord, you know I love you?” – that that point where we love God with heart, soul, mind and strength? We get there because God does not coerce our love; he wins our love. He wins our love by coming to us in the person of Jesus and through his gracious, loving deeds on our behalf.

Someone summed up God’s love for us like this: ‘God says, “I love you” even when you don’t recognize my voice. “I love you” even when you deny me in fear and bewilderment. “I love you” even when you don’t let your light shine. “I love you” no matter where in the pile of 153 fish you find yourself. “I love you” and walk with you and make a fire for you and feed you at dawn after a cold night at sea. “I love you” and showed you that when I was crucified, buried and resurrected for you. “I love you” because I created you and you are my artwork. “I love you” . . . my little fish.’ How can we not love him in return?