



“God Does Not Love Everyone Equally, and Neither Should We”

Scripture – 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, June 11, 2017

I hope that last line of the passage sounded very familiar. It is the benediction Sudie and I often use.

As you know, the Apostle Paul wrote letters to several different churches. In some cases, perhaps in each, he did not put pen to papyrus himself. He dictated letters while someone else transcribed them.

How do we know this? Look at the final chapter of his Letter to the Romans. It reads: “I, Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord.”

The person who transcribed First Corinthians is not named, but Paul took the pen from whoever was writing and added at the end of the letter: “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.”

In his Letter to the Galatians Paul does not hide his fury with them for falling prey to those who are perverting the gospel. At the beginning, he does not give thanks to God for them as he does in his other letters, and at the end of Galatians Paul yanks the pen from the hand of his scribe and writes: “SEE WHAT LARGE LETTERS I MAKE WHEN I AM WRITING IN MY OWN HAND! That was the first century version of writing an email in all caps.

As I see it, since Paul used scribes, he could have made his job much easier. Why didn’t he create one masterpiece of a letter – such as his letter to the Romans which lays out most of his theology – and ask a scribe to make copies for the Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians and so on?

Why didn’t Paul send the same letter to each of the churches? Because each congregation was wrestling with something unique and Paul knew he needed to address each specific situation.

Our focus this morning is the final verse of Second Corinthians. It may be the verse of Scripture you have heard more than any other verse in the Bible because so many ministers use it as the benediction.

It is so popular because it succinctly proclaims the Trinitarian formula: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you.” That last phrase – “the communion of the Holy Spirit” – is also translated “fellowship of the Holy Spirit” and “sharing in the Holy Spirit.” Paul seems to be indicating the bond we have with God – that loving bond, that grace-filled bond – is created by God’s Spirit.

If you read this entire letter, you will discover that Second Corinthians was not a cheery “I miss you. Hope all is well” kind of letter. That is because while Paul has been away from Corinth, some in the congregation have undermined him and tried to discredit him. This letter is Paul’s defense against the charges.

Yet, despite the fact that he has become testy over their incriminations, Paul ends with a blessing stating God’s love for them. I wonder how the Corinthians heard that blessing. Did it cause them to pause and think about the amazing fact that the Creator of the Cosmos cared about them? Or, had they heard it so many times that it had lost its punch?

How do you hear the declaration that God loves you? Do those words grab you, startle you, amaze you, and inspire you? Or, have you heard the message so many times it no longer has any power? Like batteries in a flashlight that have been left on until they are dead, have the words “God loves you” been drained of their power to energize you.

Have you seen the bumper sticker that says “God Loves Everyone – No Exceptions”? One of the reasons for that statement is because the Old Testament frequently speaks of divine punishment for the wayward. Time and again the prophets issued blistering warnings that God’s wrath burned fiercely against them when they failed to live as God commanded them. God hated not only the sin, but also the sinner.

There were contrary voices to this notion in the Jewish Scriptures – the Book of Hosea is a case in point – but there was a widespread belief in the time of Jesus, that God’s love was restricted to those who walked the straight and narrow path.

Another reason we tout the motto: “God Loves Everyone – No Exceptions” is because for too long, the Church claimed that the only path to heaven was to become a Christian. Many a preacher warned that Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, regardless of how spiritual, compassionate or just, were going to straight to hell. Regrettably, that opened the door to anti-Semitism and one of the darkest chapters of human history. Today, it breathes life into Islamophobia.

I agree that God loves everyone, but I also have a problem with it. It’s too general.

Professor Tom Long, recalls a mild argument he had with a colleague who is an ethicist. She “was making a case for a certain form of equity justice, namely that a truly just society is one in which justice is like the blindfolded statue and every person is treated exactly the same. She backed up her argument by describing an incident with her two young daughters. When she discovered them fighting over a candy bar, she told her older child to divide the candy bar in half, one piece for herself and the other for her sister. Both were also told that after the older daughter divided the candy bar, the younger one would get to choose which piece she wanted. It was a nice solution since the one doing the dividing had a strong incentive to divide the candy bar as equally as possible. Society, the mother argued, would benefit from such fairness, impartiality, and equality.”

Long says, “That may work well for dividing Hershey bars and Social Security benefits, but it is less successful in plumbing the character of human need and desire. At our depths, we do not desire to be treated with impartial indifference; we want to be known, understood, and treasured as a very particular self...(Long goes on to say that) the candy bar incident does not really describe the most important ways that his colleague, a very loving mother, actually treats her children. She does not show her love to them blindly and equally, dividing things right down the middle. If one of them has the flu, she does not desert her bedside after 45 minutes in order to give precisely equal time to the other. If one of them comes home from school crying because the ‘popular’ girls fenced her out, she is the daughter who gets an extra helping of motherly affection that day. In the law courts and other public spaces, we may desire that justice wear a blindfold, impartially dispensing benefits in equal portions. But

we want parents – and we want God as our parent – not to wear blindfolds, but instead to see each of us in all our needs and particularities with the eyes of tenderness and love.”¹

Camilla and I love all three of our children dearly and we make a deliberate effort to treat them fairly. But if one of them is having a difficult time, that one surely receives more of our attention. We do not love our children in general. We treasure each of them and extend care and concern that is unique to their particular situation.

If God loves us in a similar fashion, not one all-encompassing blanket of love that covers all of us, but rather with a love that is unique to each of us, what might that look like?

Of course, it is impossible to devise a totally accurate picture of God. God is always more than we can describe or even imagine. That is why the Scriptures provide us with numerous images. Some are human-like images – Shepherd, Father, King. Some are non-human – wind, rock, light. None is complete, but each adds different dimensions. God is like a shepherd because God cares about us, guides us, and sometimes prods us. God is like the wind because God is immaterial and not limited to one place.

I want to propose a contemporary image that may sound a bit wacky, but I think it has something going for it. Imagine the ultimate Wi-Fi system that sends out radio waves that cannot be blocked by any amount of concrete or steel and receives back an infinite amount of data. God’s eyes, ears, and heart work like these invisible waves permeating every crevice of creation in order to see, hear, and feel what is happening in every single life in every single moment. As soon as God perceives what is happening, God envisions the best possible next step and whispers in our souls our optimum choice given our situation. This action of sending, receiving, sending back happens constantly – an endless loop.

How we envision God is not my point. My point is that what is currently happening in *your* life, *my* life, and *our neighbors’* lives is not the same, so God envisions the next steps differently for each of us. Why? Because God cares about each of us the way a loving parent cares for each of her children – not with a blind equality, not with a one-size-fits-all concern, but rather with a love that responds uniquely to each of us.

A loving mother does not say to her teenager, “I love you unconditionally, now go and do whatever you please.” Rather, she says, “I love you too much to simply sit by passively when you choose a destructive path. I will do what I can to persuade you to choose a better path.”

Similarly, God responds with warmth and tenderness to one who is wounded and needs healing, but God confronts the one who is harming himself or others. We have the freedom to reject those God sends to comfort and support us. We have the freedom to ignore the pain we cause and the guilt we feel.

But imagine what would happen if you took seriously that God loves you and cares about your particular situation and seeks to transform you daily so that you might become more Christ-like.

Just imagine!

NOTES

1. Tom Long, “The Love of God,” *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2017, p. 21.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE ~ SUDIE NIESEN THOMPSON

God our Creator – who molded mountains as if from clay and painted sunsets onto the canvas of heaven – we marvel at your imagination that conceived of long-necked giraffes, and your artistry, by which you stitched stars into a tapestry of sky ... your creativity that yielded butterflies of brilliant blue, and your skill, which gave us the most delicate rose. But – most of all – we marvel at your grace, for we know that creation was born of nothing more than your desire to be *with* and *for* the world ... Out of love your Spirit danced across primeval chaos to stir the watery depths to life; out of love you swirl among us still, breathing new life into this weary world. So, with gratitude and praise, we join our voices with the song of creation to proclaim your glory: Holy are you, O God!

God our Redeemer – who came that we might have life, and have it abundantly – our hope lies in you. We spend our days pretending we are self-reliant, and concealing all vestiges of vulnerability. But – if we are honest with ourselves – we realize there is much in our world, in our communities, in our very lives that cries out for healing. So we lift before you a creation groaning for redemption, and pray that you would – once again – enter into our brokenness. Be present, O God, with each body that aches from disease, and in every home that is conflict-rent ... in each community reeling from violence, and with every person who suffers the pangs of loss. God with us – we trust that you alone deliver us from bondage to freedom, from despair to hope, from death to life. So, clinging to the promise that you wipe away every tear from our eyes, we cry out: Holy are you, O Christ!

God our Sustainer – who summons us to faith, and inspires us to hope – we rejoice that you claim us as your children and commission us for service. By your grace you draw us into holy work, equip us with gifts to glorify you, and empower us to be your witnesses to the ends of the earth. Bless us, we pray, with the wisdom to discern your voice, and the courage to respond to your call ... with love to offer compassion, and grace to reveal Christ. Send us out with joy and lead us forth in peace to sing your praise: Holy are you, O Spirit!

In the name of the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – we pray, and join our voices to offer the prayer Christ taught us: **Our Father ...**