

WHERE IS GOD?

Psalm 22:25-31
1 John 4:7-21

Faith Community
May 10, 2009

Introduction

A friend of mine served a church where a new member joined and then began bringing the most unusual offerings. I don't mean chickens or pigs, but the amount of his offering was never an even number, and it was always different. One week he wrote a check for \$56.12; the next week \$63.84; and the next week \$102.79.

The treasurer couldn't figure it out. Every week this man put in a different amount in the offering. Finally, it was too much for the treasurer and he had to go to the man and ask why his offering was always different.

The man said, "I'm a new Christian and I am trying to tithe ten percent of what I get. My paycheck is different each week, so I just give one tenth of what I have received. I don't want to come to judgment day and be \$3.18 short and lose everything!"

This new Christian was trying to earn God's acceptance by being exact about his tithe. He thought if he did the right thing and was careful, God would have to save him. He thought if he did the acts of love that God wants, God would have to give him his reward.

I

We think "Because I love, God loves me" but the Bible tells us just the opposite is true: "Because God loves me, I love." God doesn't love us because we have earned it by being such loving people; instead, we are able to love because God first loved us. Love comes from God. God's love comes first and God's love makes our love possible.

We all have seen a person who has grown up in a family without love; it often results in the young person getting in trouble. I talked to a chaplain who worked in a juvenile detention facility. A young person about whom I was concerned had been arrested and taken there. The chaplain said, "Are there serious problems in this boy's family?" I said yes there were. He said, "My theory is that these boys' problems stem from their parents problems. So every time I asked that same question. So far the answer has always been yes."

When we don't know love up close, it's more difficult to act with love. The good news is that we are all loved by God and we all can experience God's love. John is telling us in this passage that love originates with God. When we have experienced God's love, then we are able to show love to other people.

II

The author of First John says the most amazing thing – God is love. He says that God is love and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them. Have you ever loved someone? John says if you have ever loved someone, then you know something about God. Those who have known love have known God.

I suppose you've heard before that in Greek there are three different words for love. Where we have one word to cover all kinds of love, the Greek has three words that clarify the distinctions. PHILIA is the word for friendship or what we used to call "brotherly love." Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love.

EROS is the word for romantic or sexual love. When we talk about falling in love or making love the word is "Eros." The most obvious word we have from this is erotic.

AGAPE is the word for self-giving love, selfless love, love that doesn't demand or expect anything in return.

Of course, when John says that God is love he uses the word agape. So he is saying here if you have experienced selfless love, you have experienced a glimpse of God. If you have received, or especially if you have offered self-giving love, then you know at least a little bit about God. Carl Holladay says, "When we love, it is only proof that a divine seed has been sown in us."¹

If you think about it, that should mean there are a lot fewer atheists than there seems to be.

III

God is love. We know that's true, but we can't reverse that sentence to say "Love is God." It doesn't fit, because while God is love, God is a great deal more than love. God is even more complex than love. But when we know selfless love we know something of God. As love cares, so God cares. Someone has said that love is not a characteristic of God, it is God's essence.

Several years ago someone asked the kids in our Sunday school to draw a picture of how they thought God looked. Most of the kids drew pictures of an old man with a white beard.

I suppose in some ways it was a trick question, without intending to be, because we can't really draw a picture of God. It is sort of like asking kids to draw a picture of love. You can draw pictures of the ways in which love is seen in the world, but to draw a picture of love is impossible. The best picture, of course, would be one of Jesus.

IV

All of this means that you and I can help other people have an experience of God. When we show self-giving love we offer people a glimpse of God. When other people experience what it's like to be loved without earning that love, they have a chance to experience God.

I talked with a minister who went on a mission trip with his church to Mexico. The first night the families from the Mexican church served them dinner. It was a big meal – chicken, tortillas, and vegetables – lots of delicious Mexican food.

When the mission team sat down to dinner there were only enough chairs for their group. The pastor said to the pastor of the Mexican church, "Isn't your church going to eat with us?" He said, "No, you are eating our people's food. This is their chicken for the week and most of their food."

In an act of selfless love the members of that church gave up their food so that the visiting church would feel welcomed and could eat well. Needless to say, that group experienced God in the self-giving love of their hosts.

Conclusion

You may have heard the name, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a Lutheran pastor in Germany during the rise of Adolf Hitler. He came from a wealthy, highly educated and highly respected family. He stunned his family when he told them he intended to go into the ministry.

As a pastor he worked with a church, he taught seminary students, and he wrote books about ethics, theology, the church, and the Bible. He also actively opposed Adolf Hitler. While much of the German church was acquiescing to Hitler, Bonhoeffer led the church movement against him.

At one point in his career he was invited to come to teach at Union Theological Seminary in NYC. He stayed there for a few years, but it bothered him that he wasn't in his homeland helping his people. He prayed about what to do. Finally he decided he had to go back to Germany. He wrote that as he boarded the boat home he felt a great sense of relief that he was doing what God was calling him to do. Not long after he returned to Germany he was arrested by the Nazis. While he was held in the concentration camp, he wrote letters home, he read the gospel of Mark over and over, and he wrote poetry. Many of the letters and poems have been collected in a book called *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

One day the guards came to get him from his cell. They stripped him and hung him. Bonhoeffer was killed just days before the American troops freed the camp where he was held.

Because of the ultimate love he showed millions of people have seen a glimpse of God. The writings of Bonhoeffer are still very popular 65 years after his death. His story and his witness are still being told because his act of selfless love gives us such a clear understanding of God at work in the world.

God is love. We see God in acts of selfless love.

Amen

¹ Carl Holladay, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary*, (Nashville: Abindon Press, 1984), 202.