**Power of Love**

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Horseheads First UMC

3rd Lent

**Numbers 21:4-9**

**4**From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. **5**The people spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.’ **6**Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. **7**The people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. **8**And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’ **9**So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

**John 3:14-21**

**14**And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15**that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

**16‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.**

**17**‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. **18**Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. **19**And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. **20**For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. **21**But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’

Love. It is the subject of poets across the centuries. When someone gets married it is written into the vows as central to the day; reflected in the bible reading from I Corinthians 13: *Love is patient, love is kind, not boastful, full of mercy, never rejoices in the wrong but rejoices in the right, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. Love never fails.*

Love is in the air as well as found in the waters of baptism that washes the soul clean from all stains of sin; love is shared at the table of the Lord as we partake the sacred meal of communion, remembering the One who loved perfectly without a divided heart.

Love is at the center of many songs that have to do with human relationships, due to its power and elusive definition. Love is all there is when life is said and done; when a lifelong partner breathes their last and final words are given at the graveside. Love.

What are we to say about this famous quote which has become central to our faith, words which Jesus himself spoke, defining the very purpose for which he came to earth? *For God loved the world so much that He gave His only Begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not die but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.*

Eternal life: usually the focus of this phrase for us. WE must be saved; we must be born again; we must believe in Him who was sent by God, Jesus the Savior of the whole world. But why? Love. God loved **the world** so much… that means the animals, the oceans, the fields where our crops are grown, the rain forests, the deserts and the beings created in God’s image: us humans. It means that God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us and bestows upon us His blessing, His grace, His mercy and His love, all through the person of Jesus Christ. And all we have to do is believe it.

But.

But what?

How can we believe in something so beautifully “other”? So far away? So.. elusive?

I have grown up in the church. I, like many of you, have learned these words of Love since I was little. My Sunday school teachers reinforced it and my pastors have taught and preached it. But there are times when, even as a church – raised person, I have fallen off the wagon, have hurt other people, have acted selfishly, have put my own pain at the forefront instead of putting other’s needs first. I am an imperfect person living in the shadow of a loving God who loves me so much that He keeps giving mercy and forgiveness and newness and a new chance to love God and love other people perfectly. I am humanly weak but spiritually strong in Christ. I am nothing and He is everything; whatever is good in me is due to Jesus Christ and what He does to live through my life.

What about people who have not had my advantage, growing up in the faith of God? There are people just outside these doors who do not have the advantage of growing up in a Christian home, in a Christian church, hearing the bible read to them and preached to them and taught to them. What are they to do who are starting from scratch, having to learn what love is by trial and error in the world, trusting those who promise love but give it conditionally, with reservation or deceit, or just plain human failure?

What about those inside these doors, who come wondering, questioning, some at the end of their rope having tried all kinds of love without ever feeling worthy of it, valued by it or given hope because of it? What about those who struggle to feel any love at all from a God who allows evil and suffering and pain and sorrow in this world? What about the one person here today, in person or online, for whom this is their last hope: finding Love in a creator who never talks with them? What about the silence that returns to us when we cry out for answers to life’s suffering?

There is a message in here which must be heard. Love conquers all.

We cannot hear this amid the noise of our own objections, activities and questions; it is too faint for that. We have to choose to quiet our hearts to listen to the song of the universe and only then can we open our ears to this: Love Conquers All.

In fact, the word goes beyond mere words which can bring us comfort and for which we long our whole life. We can not only listen but feel Love resonating toward us like sunshine on our damp, cold fields at the start of the day. LOVE CONQUERS ALL.

From the moment you were conceived in your mother’s womb, you were loved. The bible says in one place that God knew you even before you were knit together there.

When you were born, someone loved you, whether a mother, father or both were present, someone divine looked upon you and said, “how beautiful, how wonderful, what a miracle you are!”

When you started to grow up you learned love and hate and anger and peacemaking and how to fight and how to defend yourself in a world that is as often cruel as it is loving.

When you have faced hardship you survived (look here you are!) and when you have had sorrow beyond measure, somehow you looked up and found hope enough to go forward and not backward. You are a miracle in the making, even if you have forgotten that fact or never learned it to begin with. You are a miracle in the making because God makes miracles, and you are one of God’s miracles.

Because Jesus knew we would have doubts about God’s love, he told stories. One of his stories is about the wayward son. It is called the Prodigal Son, prodigal meaning simply, “*spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant.”* A man had two sons. As they reached adulthood, one stayed home managing the farm and one wanted to get away from home, to travel and see the world. The younger one went to his father and revealed his plan to go out away from the farm and the home he had always known, and to travel he needed his inheritance money now. His father gave it over freely, knowing the son would never be content unless he struck out on his own. So he went out, soon spending his inheritance without thinking his expenses through, living high on the hog and pretending he was actually rich. When his money ran out, he realized how stupid he had been and took a job feeding pigs. He fell so far that he wished he could eat as well as those pigs. So, starving and destitute, he came up with a plan to return home not as a son, but as a hired hand to work on his father’s farm. There, he would have enough to eat at least. And so, in humbleness he returned, the once prodigal (wasteful) son, asking pity from his father. He really did not expect more than to become an employee there.

It is here that Jesus’s story takes an unexpected turn. While he was still a way off, His Father Saw Him. His Father Ran to where He was. His father stopped the son’s planned confession about being a prodigal, with all its excuses, tears, stories of hunger and appeals for mercy, right in its tracks. He cut him off while he was still talking and said to his servants, *“Go, kill our best calf for a feast! Put my best suit on him and my most expensive ring on his finger! My son, who was lost is now found! My son, who was dead as far as I knew, is now found alive! We will throw the best party we have ever had!”*

For God loved the world so much that He gave his only begotten son….

Another Story I want to share with you, from the mind and heart of Jesus is the **pearl of great price.**

This story is not like the prodigal son story; it is one sentence long. Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like this: “…*a merchant seeking beautiful pearls,****46****who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”*

For God loved the world so much that He gave his only begotten son…

And a third story Jesus told is my story. He did not tell this in the bible, He told it in my life.

I was raised attending church every Sunday morning and youth group Sunday nights. I wondered as I wandered and I wanted to know that God was real, for myself. As a teenager I heard the good news preached in church and we sung about it all along the seasons, but I needed some proof that God was real and that God cared about me at all. I walked into a crisis of faith: wanting to believe but seeing no evidence that God was real and God loved me or even knew I existed. I wanted to believe but could not.

I shared with camp counselors, my pastor, my parents, my brothers and sisters the struggle I felt but no one could convince me because each one had their own struggles to believe and you cannot transplant faith from one person to another. I was in the same camp as the man who came to Jesus for his son to be healed. Jesus told him, *“all things are possible for him who believes.”* And the man responded, ***“I believe; help my unbelief.”***

I was on the fence, unsure about myself, unsure about God whom I had learned about and unsure about my future.

I believed in God as I went off to college but still wanted to know 100% that God was real and cared about me personally. I was in Christian groups on campus, I was going to a variety of churches seeking answers and I was reading my Bible. But I wanted more assurance. And so I asked: God, I need to know you are always there, Give me a sign, something I can hold onto today and in the future days when I doubt. Send your holy spirit, give me a gift, show me a sign so I will know you are there.

This was an agonizing prayer. I had had it. I had faith and I had doubts and the doubts were winning. So I persisted, in prayer, in thought, and by myself. I needed an experience with God.

 (You may be in the same boat this morning, knowing but not knowing, believing but not believing, hoping but unsure that there is a God that loves you, or even knows you exist.)

And after days and weeks of seeking, asking, knocking on the doors of heaven, after hours one evening praying and saying to God, *“I am not going away until you answer me, otherwise I will not believe in you any more.”*

God came to me. I have tried to describe it in sermons before, and in small groups sharing my story, but it fails to capture the whole thing. God came to me, and I felt God and I heard God and I knew God is real. From the top of my head to the soles of my feet, God was in me that night in the stairway of my apartment. And I have never doubted God since.

I have now told three stories: two told by Jesus in the Bible and one told by me about a crucial experience in my life.

From the story of the prodigal son, you see a man’s life wasted on riotous living, going through cash like water and as a result, an unworthy soul. He returns to his father beaten, defeated by his encounter in the world and finally humble enough to just be a servant, if given the chance. Have you lived this life? Have you chosen to spend your time and money and gifting by only pleasing yourself? Have you acted foolishly and squandered any and all goodness you have been given? THEN THERE IS STILL HOPE FOR YOU.

God is your heavenly Father, and he sees you returning even while you are rehearsing your excuses. God runs to embrace you and overwhelms your confessions with his shouts of love. He gives you new clothes to wear, clothes of love and compassion and comfort and warmth. He puts a ring of beauty on your finger, reminding you He wants only the best for you. He sees you as more valuable than that jewelry, the finest in the world. And God puts a party on in your honor with dancing through the night! You want to wallow in pity? You are not condemned. Nonsense, God says! You were lost but now are found (in God’s house) and you were dead as far as God knew, but now are alive. What are you to do if you have been the prodigal? Wear the robe and the ring. Eat the feast with your family. You are home.

*For God loved you so much He gave his only begotten son that when You believe, you are given the gift of eternal life!*

From the story of the pearl of great price, you are the ones who have been hidden, waiting for someone to come and find you: someone who knows your value and your worth. You are so valuable to God that you are like that pearl and God will pay dearly to buy you, even pay by giving his only Son to pay for you. And you are the merchant too in this story, seeking God and looking for God and asking for God to reveal where He is hiding. Jesus said for us to ask, seek and knock and we will find the answers, we will find the way and have the door opened to us regarding God’s presence and love. You are both the pearl being bought and the merchant selling all he has to buy such a pearl. When you find each other, God has found you and you have found God.

*God loved all the world to this point: God sent His only Son and everyone who believes in Him will live, not a few years or a few decades but for infinity years with God.*

And the third story, my story, might have touched something in you which you don’t know what to do with. It is asking God to prove God exists. Have you ever done this? Asking God to write it in the sky or in a personal letter? Have you prayed through the night, asking God to reveal to you the secret of His being? If you have done this and come up empty, I urge you to try again. And if you are at that place of really needing to know God is real, go to God with fervor, with all your strength and do not take NO for an answer. Put God to the test. Make God answer you. Be Bold and courageous. Ask for what you need.

*God loved the whole world and everything and everyone in it and proved it by sending His only Son, to the extent that every single person who chooses to believe in Him will never die. They will live forever. Because God sent his Son into the world so that all the world, meaning you and me and everyone, will be saved from death.*

But what is the message we are to emphasize? It is love. Sin results in separation but faith results in life. How will people know what it means to love the light? How will they learn to change their hearts and minds? How will they know that they need a savior at all? Simple: when they receive mercy and grace and acceptance from us. We are the radiance of Christ’s love that draws those who have been choosing the opposite. We are the sign that Christ is at work in the world and that there is hope for living, there are resources to be shared, there are opportunities for grace. How will the world know that they are loved by God? Because they are loved by us, the church, the body of Christ.

Three stories. One God. Are you willing to believe?