

“HOW TO EXPERIENCE GOD’S LOVE”

A sermon by Pastor James R. Blades
First Presbyterian Church of San Luis Obispo, CA
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Ephesians 3:14-21

*He loves me...He loves me not.
He loves me...He loves me not.*

You know that old lovers daisy roulette! I think everyone knows it. And I find a lot of Christian folks who take this approach to their relationship with God. When happiness seems to come their way: "He loves me." When adversity threatens: "He loves me not." When blessings accrue to their interest: "He loves me." When the day brings loss or hardship: "He loves me not." When sunshine and flowers brighten the path, "He loves me." When the thistles tangle and trip, "He loves me not."

I wonder if anyone here can relate! Anyone here whose experience of God's love and whose sense of God's favor have ever become an up-and-down ordeal, a fair weather affair. Anyone here who has found their sense of well being blew in the breeze in their changing moods and circumstances. I think most all of us have, at one time or other, had such circumstances in our lives that we wondered whether God really loved us. If so, we're not in bad company. Jacob did. Naomi did. Moses did. Job did. We were surprised to read last year in her memoirs that Mother Teresa of Calcutta did

Perhaps we all do well to take serious stock of Paul's admonition in this morning's Scripture who exhorts us to be "*rooted and established in love*"

"The greatest happiness in life," wrote Victor Hugo, "is the conviction that we are *loved*; loved for ourselves, or rather loved in spite of ourselves."

How can we *experience* God's love for us and not just spout it as a theology? How can we live in God's love not just at those glorious spiritual mountaintop sun breaks, but day by day, even when the days turn gray?

"Be rooted and ground in love." Rooted and grounded! What an interesting picture. Rooted and grounded in such a way that whichever way the winds of change blow your life, rooted and grounded in such a way that however the storms bend your stamina, you know with a knowing, that you are loved by God. I believe this passage suggests to us several disciplines, if you will, that can help us on to this sense of rootedness and groundedness.

"I pray," says Paul," that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."

Faith is the first key. We all have faith. The question is never if we have faith but rather what is that faith in? What do we believe? For we surely do believe things about God and life.

And what we believe has a crucial influence on our lives.

If you *believe* there is a deadly snake loose in your house, your response of fear will be the same whether or not there really is one!

If we *believe* God loves us, that God means us no harm but only healing through all our life's experiences, will not our interpretation of those experiences be accordingly influenced? If we believe God is out to get us, will that not likewise skew our perception and thinking?

Faith in God's promise of love, even when we don't presently see evidence of it: that is the first key to being rooted and grounded in God's love.

"When darkness veils God's lovely face, I rest in His unchanging grace."

Faith like that, Where do we get it? "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). Do you know the promises of God's love in the Scripture? Would you know where to find them when you needed most to remember them?

"I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jer. 31:3).

"As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is God's love toward those who revere Him" (Psalm 103:11).

"God so *loved* the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

"But God demonstrates His own *love* toward us in this: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

"Who shall separate us from the *love* of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or peril or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who *loved* us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the *love* of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom.8:35-39).

We live in God's love when we believe in God's promise of love no matter what. We nourish our belief in God's love by reading the *promise* of God's love in the Bible; reading it over and over and over again.

Tell me the old, old story of unseen things above

Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.

Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon,

The early dew of morning has passed away at noon.

During WWII a man went off to war. As so many did, he left behind the girl he intended to marry. "Wait for me," he told her, "till I return." (Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me ...) When he kissed her goodbye at the train depot, he put in her hands a letter expressing his love and devotion to her. He told her to read it whenever she began to forget or doubt his sentiment.

As the months of his absence dragged on, she did read it, repeatedly. Whenever she felt lonely, whenever she doubted it was all true. By the time the soldier returned, that letter's pages were nearly worn out from countless readings.

The Bible is *God's* love-letter. In it, God has declared, described and demonstrated in Christ God's boundless affection toward us.

I wonder how many of us urbane, sophisticated adults would more fully experience God's love if we simply subscribed to the hymn we learned as children: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

I pray that ... Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

One of the most helpful little booklets I've ever read is *My Heart, Christ's Home*, by Robert Munger. The main idea of this booklet is that Christ comes to make our inner selves His dwelling place. The reader is led to walk through each imaginary inner room, and to ask: Would Christ be welcome and comfortable here? Would the furnishings and the pictures on the walls be inviting to Him? Is there any room or closet to which I would be too shamed or too untrusting to grant Christ entrance?

I like Munger's house metaphor of our inner selves. I have used it for an illustration often in counseling and thinking through my own experience.

The experiences we endure, the memories we hold, the things we think about, the relationships that have formed us, these form the layout and furniture of our inner dwelling. Some rooms have furnishings we'd rather not look at and pictures we'd rather not remember. Some rooms are pleasant to visit; we want to stay there. Others hold thoughts or ruminations we would quite rather shut the door on. For some of us, a whole portion of our inner household remains "off limits." Ghosts of the past dwell there. Unpleasant, shaming, or frightful worries and memories. Some are locked closets, too of resentments we have stored away, bitternesses we have harbored, from which we would rather shut out from Christ's merciful, forgiving presence.

"I pray," says Paul, "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, [that you might] know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you might be filled to the measure of *all the fullness* of God." That word "filled and fullness" in the original Greek means to infuse, to pervade, to *permeate* like a fragrance" Every room, every nook, every cranny, every sad place, every hurt place, every shamed place, "filled to the measure of all the fullness of God," wall to wall. That's Paul's prayer and God's wish for us.

But here's the deal: *We* hold the key of access to every room. We can let God's healing Spirit in, or keep God's Spirit shut out.

So the psalmist prayed, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the way to wholeness."¹

There are times when I have prayed that prayer while taking a mental walk through the corridors of my inner household, when I have become aware of rooms in myself that have been shut up against the Spirit of God of Love.

Surrender is not a one time thing. It is a lifetime thing. The more you put your faith in the promise of God's love, the more you open your whole self to the influence of God's love, the more you will experience it.

"I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Paul doesn't stop there.)

"Now to him," he says, "who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

Paul's prayer doesn't leave off on an inward note, and neither does Christ's love. By very nature, God's presence and power at work within us must lead outward to accomplish "far more abundantly ..."

¹ Psalm 139:13-14

Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tournier put it this way: "God does not enter into our lives in order to remain hidden. God's [love] will escape us if we selfishly try to keep it to ourselves."

We find this concept all the way across the Bible.

Proverbs 11:24-25: "A generous person will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed."

"Give and it will be given to you," said Jesus. "With the measure you use it will be measured to you again."

Get the point? If you want to experience God's love, start by giving it away. If you want your own thirst slaked, start by giving others to drink. I think of it like this, when I find ways to express God's love, I get into the loop between giver and recipient and I get to see and experience that love myself.

"Well I don't feel very loving right now," you might be thinking. Or "I don't feel very loving toward that person or certain people." So how can I start giving something I don't have?" Perhaps the wise words of C.S. Lewis might help us here:

"Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you love someone, you will presently come to love that one."

Let's summarize this discussion of experiencing God's love by asking ourselves a few important questions.

1. *Is my sense of well being rooted in the **promise** of God's love, or in the ups-and-downs of my own fluctuating circumstances and moods? Is it "He loves me; he loves me not?" Or "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so."*
2. *Are there rooms, closets, corners, in my secret inner self that remain closed to the Christ healing, loving presence? Are there parts of myself that I have feared to open to Him? "Search me O God, and know my heart; scan me and weigh my thoughts. See if there is anything in me that would obstruct your life-giving presence."*
3. *Are there opportunities right now right around me, beckoning me? Opportunities to pour into others' lives what I would wish Christ to pour into mine? "Give, and it will be given to you," said Jesus. "A good measure, **pressed down**, shaken together, running over, will be poured into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you receive."*

Let us pray together the prayer of Psalm 139.

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

³ You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.

⁵ You surround me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸ I try to count them-- they are more than the sand; I come to the end-- I am still with you.

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.

²⁴ See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.