

John 3: 14-21

March 22, 2009

United Memorial – Lent 4

Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer, amen.

I have a friend, a retired minister, who ended worship each Sunday with these words:

“Remember, God loves you and I love you.”

That is a very personal statement.

I remember participating in a faith development program, one of the exercises was to look directly at another participant and say something to them about love.

A woman, whom I didn't know very well at the time, came up to me and looking directly into my eyes, said, “Catherine, Jesus loves you.”

This was a powerfully intimate moment.

This happened well over a decade ago and continues to have a profound effect on me.

I think sometimes we forget that love is a very personal experience.

An intimate one.

And I believe that God's love is a very personal experience.

Part of today's gospel, John 3: 16, the part which reads, God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, so that those who believe will not die but have everlasting life.

Do we really believe that God loves us unconditionally?

Part of the problem I think is the way in which we define love.

What is love?

Can anyone here give me a definitive answer to that?

Probably not.

I would suggest that some of our problem lies in our language and the usage of it.

We will say things like:

I love chocolate cake.

Or, I love sleeping in on Saturday morning.

Or, I love having friends over for dinner.

We often use love when we really mean is that we like something a great deal or we enjoy it intensely.

And when we use love to refer to things we take away the relational and reciprocal aspect of love.

Keep in mind that the New Testament was written in Greek.

And they have four words for love:

The words are: Philios meaning friendship

Eros: appreciation/desire, including art, philosophy.

Sturge: pals.

And Agape: as in grace.

So where in the midst of these four different words for love is God who so loved the world?

How do we feel when we love someone?

And how do we feel when someone loves us?

Parental love will love a child before that child knows how to love back and will keep on loving even when that child behaves destructively.

Love between friends, or to use the Greek word, Philios, is less easily explained.

I am sure that we all have friends whom we don't see very often, in fact sometimes years can go by, but there is love between us and when we do get together the years disappear as if they never were.

But in this there is some reciprocity.

For a healthy life-giving friendship there has to be a response to each other.

If only one person wants to continue the friendship, and the other places no value on it, then there is hurt and pain.

And sometimes we wish we could stop loving someone just by saying the words, "I don't love you anymore."

Sturge is the Greek work meaning pals, I think it originally meant the relationships that develop between men in the army.

That bond that speaks of knowing that your buddies are behind you all the way, that they would go to their deaths for you.

Again, this is a reciprocal love.

And nothing distant or disinterested about it.

We don't talk about Eros much in church, about appreciation and desire for one another.

But it is another part of loving in a deep intimate relationship.

We do talk about agape, unconditional love, grace.

The sense that God loves us whether or not we deserve it.

Does anyone else here this morning struggle with the idea that God loves us always, even when we are unlovable.

Or when we do things that we think make us unlovable.

I do.

Sometimes I believe it and sometimes I don't.

Intellectually I always believe it, but when I am feeling unlovable, I don't always believe it in my heart.

But always, always, love is about relationships.

Relationships between family and friends.

Relationships between lovers.

Relationships between us and God.

One of my professors says that love is never disinterested.

That there is always an element of self-interest in it.

I wonder if that thought can be applied to God.

Imagine a God who needs our love just as much as we need God's love?

We don't often think of God needing us.

What I like to think about is the sense that God needs us to be in a relationship of love with God as much as we need to know that God loves us.

And that love was revealed in Jesus Christ.

That love that walked the dusty streets telling of the love of God and the kingdom of heaven.

The love that overturned the tables in the temple.

The love that challenges the status quo.

The love that was passionately interested in the everyday lives of the people he knew.

The love that kept his feet on the road to Jerusalem and ultimately his death.

We are not usually called upon to go to our deaths for something.

But I think that every parent here would willingly put their lives at stake for the sake of their children.

Our love for our children endures forever.

That is probably one of the reasons we have traditionally thought of God as Father.

Friendships may come and go.

Romantic relationships may wither and die.

But the bond of a parent for a child never ends.

It endures forever.

Even after we have strayed from the path that God would have us travel.

God's love endures.

Even when we are less than what God would hope for.

God's love endures.

Even when we doubt the existence of love.

God's love endures.

So what does this love of God mean in this world of ours that is hurting so much?

What does it mean when it is written that "God so loved the world?"

Listen to this story from an on-line discussion group that I belong to:

There was an American Bible Society missionary sent to the Andean region of South America.

His job was to live in a remote area among the people of a tribe quite isolated from other peoples.

He was to learn their language and then translate the New Testament into their tongue.

After he was there for some time, he discovered that this tribe didn't seem to have a word in their language for "love."

How in the world, he wondered, would he ever be able to translate the NT into their language if he couldn't find a word for love?

Then one day, coming out of his house, he greeted a local nine-year old neighbor girl.

Knowing that her mother had gone across a mountain range to take care of the girl's sick auntie, he asked the girl how she was doing with her mom being gone for the last several days.

She said it was not easy.

She missed her Mommy.

Then, brushing aside a tear, she blurted out, "My heart hurts for my Mommy!"

"My heart hurts!" Here he had found his word for love!

Later, when he translated John 3:16, it read in that language: "God's heart so hurt for the world...."

I believe that God's heart is hurting now.

Hurting for this world that is so separated by hate and war and poverty.

Not just the world of Halifax, not just Canada, not just Christians. God's heart hurts for all the world...

When we are constantly bombarded with bad news and we don't have job security and our retirement funds have been diminished, it is easy to hunker down and only be concerned with ourselves, our own hurts and concerns... but our scripture speaks of other things...

And sometimes it is a matter of looking at the world through another lens in order to see evidence of God's love for the world.

At the Session meeting the other night, I asked the elders to give me some examples of God loving the world.

Some of their answers were:

- A sunrise over the water
- The peace that comes with prayer
- Spending time at the hospital with people who are sick

There were other answers but I chose to use those because they illustrate something...

That God is found in nature, God is found in prayer and God is found in relationships with one another.

I think one of the challenges of our lives is to remember that we are all intimately connected, and our lives are bound up with the health of our planet.

It may not be easy to feel connected to stories such as the ones we hear in the Minute for Mission...

Sometimes our local concerns seem so much more important and we wonder with all the issues we have, why bother with things that are taking place across the country... or on the other side of the world...

Why should we care about lack of education on the other side of the world, or about contaminated water on native reserves.

What I have come to realize is that we are all intimately connected... When we ignore situations around the world that leave people without basic necessities such as food, clothing, clean water and access to education, we are leaving them to live in despair and hopelessness and we leave them to those who prefer hatred and violence rather than love.

Today's child who lacks food will do anything, rob, steal, cheat, kill, for a piece of bread.

Today's child who lacks education, can become tomorrow extremist.

Today's child who sickens or dies from working on unsanitary farms on crops that wind up on our tables, can be our child who sickens and dies.

We are all connected...

So what can we do for this hurting world?

Spend time in the natural world, seeking God's presence and promise.

Spend time in prayer, praying for your neighbours near and far, seeking God's presence and promise.

Spend time with loved ones, seeking God's presence and promise.

In this fourth week of Lent, I invited you to ponder our answer to our hurting world.

In all those things and many more, we can be open to the promise of God's love of all the world.

Thanks be to God, amen.