

## The Proof of God's Love

### Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B – John 3:16

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, March 18, 2012*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

“For God so loved the world...” John 3:16 – perhaps the most recognizable verse in all of Scripture. But even with it turning up on billboards and on T-shirts and on signs in the stands at athletic competitions, do we really take time to absorb its meaning. “God so loved the world...”

There are some attributes of God that don't require a lot of proof. Some features of the divine character intrude so blatantly on our world that they become nearly self-evident. God's power is like that, isn't it? If we believe in God at all, we need no argument to convince us of his power. The mighty forces that surround us on all sides cry *aloud* of the power of God. The waves crashing endlessly on the shore, the sun lighting and warming the earth, all proclaim it. The flowers pushing up from the lately frozen ground witness to it. These things, and a thousand others, teach us about the power of God.

Or is any argument needed to assure us, in general, of the wisdom of God? The order with which season follows season. The planets circling the sun in their own paths century after century, even two beautifully bright ones showing up after sundown these days. Our own bodies, so intricately crafted, our senses linking us to the world around us, the process of our thought, so incomprehensible. All the constancy of nature, all the harmony of part with part – these and a multitude of other proofs speak to us of the creativity and wisdom of God.

A lot of people imagine that the love of God is like that. They picture God's love as shining large in the working of His hands. But on the contrary, if the love of God is a fact, then it is one against which a thousand contradictions are arrayed.

Considering the struggle for existence that is ceaselessly waged among all living creatures, nature certainly does not give obvious testimony to the love of God. To anyone with eyes to see, the creation in which we live and move is a literal battlefield, and its inhabitants are fighting for their lives. You won't find a place in Scripture that paints a picture of a lovely summer day and says, “Behold, proof that God is love.” God knows that before the beautiful day is ended another tornado may cut another wide swath through another town, uprooting lives along with the trees, another volcano may erupt burying whole towns, another earthquake may sift another city like so much gravel and snuff out the lives within.

Then there are those things we do to *one another*. Over the years, you will no doubt hear me argue often for the necessity of human free will. But with alarming consistency, we exercise that will in ways that are often awfully difficult to reconcile with love – things happen to God's children, which we would never *dream* of allowing to happen to our *own* children. Christians are hacked and burned and blown up in the name of “God the all merciful,” while right around the corner those claiming the name of the Lord rape and murder and call it “cleansing.” Governments and international agencies and religious bodies quarrel and fuss over who controls which big pile of resources, while in the slums of Durban and villages of Sudan and in the cities and backwoods of our own bountiful country, 25,000 people a day die every day – one every three and a half seconds – most of them children – because they cannot get enough to eat or water safe to drink.

All the while, the relentless reality of death takes another and another of those we love. When the chair is empty, and the grave is full, when the one who has been taken is so desperately needed, when tears have flowed so heavily and so long that they refuse to come, how many have cried, “How can God possibly be loving?”

“For God so loved the world...” Surely the broken world in which we live and move calls for special and tremendous proof for such a statement. Such overwhelming evidence to the contrary demands

equally solid proof of such an assertion. Such undeniable, objective *facts* cry out for proof beyond compare that love is indeed a characteristic of the God in whom we put our trust.

You see, love cannot be proved by mere words. The loudest exclamation of love may be totally empty. No mere profession of the mouth will ever satisfy the heart that longs to know another's love. Love's argument lies in deeds, not words. And the proof of deeds is especially needed when, as now, the preponderance of the evidence seems to *disprove* love. It is the facts of nature and of life, of history and of experience, that make it so hard to believe in God's love. When there are facts as hard as those that we see in the world around us fighting against the thought of love, nothing but facts can *prove* it. And so the proof God offers of his love is a fact as well. God sweeps away all the dark happenings in life by the one clear proof of the greatest deed in the world's story. "For God so loved the world..." not that he thought, not that he said, but that he *gave* his Son to take our place.

The surest test of love is sacrifice. We measure love, as one poet said, "by loss instead of gain. Not by the wine drunk, but the wine poured forth." In the willingness to sacrifice all that is dearest, lies the measure of noblest love. Now turn to Calvary. Turn to the Cross. And by the sight of our bruised and bleeding, crucified Redeemer, there begin to learn the greatness of God's love. Never, in all its zeal, did human love make any sacrifice to be compared with that made when God gave up his only Son to shame and death, "so that everyone who believes in him should not perish..."

And it is sure that a love like this never sprang from the sight of anything lovable in us. *We* love because some excellence or worth, some beauty or charm, made an indefinable appeal. Something about the object of our love catches and holds us by the heart. *We* love because we find the other *worthy* to be loved. And it is just in this respect that the love of God stands distinct from our own poor shadow. For God loved us while we were still weak, totally without spiritual understanding. While we were still wallowing in the mire of our sinfulness. God knows the deepest part of who we are. He sees that part of us that we hide from everyone. He sees the part of us that except in our darkest nights we even hide from ourselves. He sees the part of you and me that is patently *unlovable*. And yet he loves us. "God, who is rich in mercy," Paul reminds us, "out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ."

Finally, let me assure you that this argument is an argument that continues. There are proofs for the being and attributes of God which serve their purpose and then are gone. But the argument for the love of God is an argument that will never fail, will never change. Our world may and most assuredly *will* change. Gross knowledge may expand, philosophic thought may deepen, science may alter our outlook on just about everything. We may break open monumental mysteries that our mothers and fathers never dreamed of. But *always*, whatever changes fall upon the world, unshaken and unshakable stands, and will ever stand, the Cross of Christ, the one unquestionable, unassailable *proof* that God is love.

It is to the Cross that God points for the clear proof of his love for us. It is to the Cross that we cling for proof that through the storms of our life, the one who loves us will hold us fast. It is to the Cross that we look to see the true proof of our worth in the Father's eyes. And the proof offered there will never, never... never fail.

"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."