

## **“Exploring the Nature of God’s Love”**

**John 3:14–21**

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In the fall of 1954 the young Martin Luther King, Jr. preached his first sermon as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. It was based on the familiar words of John 3:16, but King’s focus was a little different than that of most white, evangelical preachers. “God’s love has a breadth,” he said, “It is a big love; it’s a broad love... God’s love is too big to be limited to a particular race. It is too big to be wrapped in a particularistic garment. It is too great to be encompassed by any single nation. God is a universal God.”

It is a different perspective, focusing on the scope of God’s love rather than belief in Jesus, but while belief certainly matters, the belief made possible through Jesus is an expression of God’s all-encompassing love. “For God so loved the world,” John says, the *kosmos*, the sum of all created being. It is because of that love that God seeks out humankind in many different ways, most effectively, we believe, by taking on human form. But it all begins with love.

I would like to explore the nature of God’s love today in light of our readings, especially the familiar words of John 3. God’s love is ever more than we can comprehend. So, the goal is not to paint a complete picture, but simply to color in a few parts of the canvas, be moved to deeper gratitude and awe, and to realize more fully the nature of our calling as we seek to reflect God’s love in and through our lives.

Following Dr. King’s line of thought, one thing worth noting is that God’s love includes everyone, all people, the whole world. This may seem obvious, but it is not the “all” part of the claim that troubles us; it is some of the specific people. Whether we admit it or not, we have a tendency to assume that some people are less worthy of God’s love than others. It may be groups of people — minorities, immigrants, Muslims, LGBT people, white supremacists, Ku Klux Klansmen — or specific individuals we know — the

irritating neighbor, the bully at school, the internet troll. But we all have people we give ourselves an out on for loving, and we wonder how God could love them.

Two stories illustrate this challenge on opposing sides of the same issue. A man in another church I served never ceased to amaze me. He had been the campaign manager for George Wallace when he ran for president, and he held onto many racist ideas. But he was a kind person in many ways, brought me homegrown vegetables in the summer, even affirmed my preaching about racial justice and said I had provoked him to think in new ways. Then, one day he said to me, “Look at the birds. Different kinds of birds don’t mate. Nor should people who are different (by virtue of their race).” And make no mistake, different meant unequal. Some were less deserving of our love and God’s.

At the other end of the spectrum on this issue, Will Campbell, a civil rights activist, spent a year drinking bourbon with a group of Ku Klux Klansmen — not because he decided their beliefs were okay, but because he realized they were the people he struggled most to love and thus to see as children of God, the people he could most easily write off as being unworthy of God’s love.

We all struggle to see some people as worthy of love — people of another race or people with hateful beliefs about race, people from other nations or people who think Americans are better than everyone else, gay people or homophobic people. But as Dr. King said, God’s love is too big for any one race, nation or group. Jesus extends love to all — Jews and Gentiles, insiders and outcasts, poor people and community leaders. “For God so loved the world,” John says. God’s love is universal. It includes everyone, there are no exceptions. And the truth is none of us is worthy of God’s love anyway. In the words of Ephesians, we are all saved by grace through faith.

Which brings us to another thing worth noting — God’s love for all begins and ends in grace. It is one thing to say this. It is quite another thing to believe it, to really believe it. Anyone who has spent any time in church will quickly acknowledge the role of grace in our faith, but somewhere in the deep recesses of our mind, even if we would never verbalize it, lies the assumption that while I may depend on grace, I don’t need it quite as much as some

people. Some of us are just worse sinners than others... at least we are not like them! But grace means grace and we all need it, we are all sinners, we are all imperfect.

It has been fascinating, though discouraging, to follow the story about the scandal at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Over 70 cadets have been charged with cheating on an online calculus exam — a matter some might quickly forgive given their view of higher math as being demonic, though not me personally, I was supposed to be a mathematician. But cheating is a serious matter at any academic institution, especially at West Point where these words are carved in stone, “A cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do.”

Fifty-eight cadets actually admitted cheating, but they are not all being expelled. They are required to go through a rehabilitation process, they are facing disciplinary action, but they will not be expelled — partly because of the uniqueness of COVID-time and online testing, but mostly because some in leadership believe they deserve a second chance. “If we are not willing to work with imperfect people,” one official said, “we won’t be working with anyone at all. We are all imperfect.”

The case stirs strong emotions, there are different points of view on what West Point’s response should have been, and I confess that I have little patience with cheating, but I am intrigued by the emphasis on the ubiquitous nature of human imperfection and thus the common need for grace. We can have different opinions on how this cheating scandal should have played out, but we are all imperfect, we all make mistakes, large and small, and thus we are all in need of grace. The good news is this is what God offers again and again.

It may not seem like there is much grace in our reading from Numbers. When the Israelites complain about their food and water, right after God has protected them in battle, God raises up poisonous snakes who bite and kill some people. There is no way to make this part of the story anything other than what it is — deeply troubling. But the story does not end here. The people confess their sin and ask for help, Moses shares their request with God, and God provides help. The people do not all die nor are they cut off from their covenant relationship with God, even though they deserve to be. It is yet another act of grace, to be added to God’s deliverance of the people from

bondage in Egypt and many acts of forgiveness when they transgressed before.

As we have noted already, the reading from Ephesians states clearly that we are saved by grace and grace alone. It is not the result of works, the author says, no one has reason to boast. And the reading from John is all about grace from beginning to end. God loves the world so much that God sends a son so that all who believe in him, trust in him personally and in his way of life, will be saved. Jesus comes to bring not condemnation but salvation, mercy and love.

So, God's love includes everyone, it is shaped by grace, and it is relentless, persistent, persevering like nothing else in this world. God simply will not rest until all are embraced in love.

God extends love in the act of creation, giving us life and bringing a world into being. God extends love by establishing covenants, sending prophets to keep people in touch with the divine will, enabling scripture to capture the record of divine-human encounters. Then, when all of these efforts prove inadequate, God takes on human form and lives among us — teaching us how to live, dying for us on a cross, and rising again to give us hope for eternal life. All of this is an expression of love, and God doesn't stop here. God continues to move among us as Spirit — guiding, encouraging, strengthening, seeking us in every way possible.

English poet Francis Thompson described the relentless nature of God's love with a 182-line poem first published in 1893 entitled "The Hound of Heaven." It was a favorite of G.K. Chesterton and J.R.R. Tolkien, not to mention many preachers and theologians. It describes God pursuing us like a hound pursues a hare — an image that speaks to someone like me who has watched our German Shepherds chasing poor little rabbits around our yards over the years. But God pursues us in love, not to do us harm, which begs the question of why we run. For many reasons — because we are not certain what God will bring, because we are not certain what we deserve, because we fear the holy...

But God pursues us, no matter how much we run, until we are embraced in love. We talk often about searching for God, and it is a worthy task, so long as we remember that God is also searching for us, and it is God's searching

that is most likely to be successful, such that our real goal is allow ourselves to be found.

In his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum tells a story about an October Saturday evening years ago when some neighborhood kids were playing hide-and-seek (pp 56-58). It brought back memories for him, as it would for most of us, though we played kick-the-can. But as he kept watching, he noticed one kid hiding so well that no one could find him. He was hiding under a pile of leaves under Fulghum's window. As the other kids were giving up, Fulghum thought about setting the leaves on fire to drive the kid out, but instead simply yelled out the window, "GET FOUND, KID!" at which point the boy started crying and ran home. "It's real hard to know how to be helpful sometimes," says the author.

Fulghum goes on to talk about a man who hid his cancer so well from his family that they were left out of his journey, and about the medieval notion that God hides from us, *Deus Absconditus*, but he dismisses that notion, saying God prefers to play Sardines, a game where we all hide away together. His point is that we are better off not hiding from God, each other or our own best selves. We are better off allowing ourselves to be found. And in the end, that's all it takes, because God never gives up searching for us and seeking to extend love. If we ever doubt this claim, we need only consider Jesus' parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son. God never stops searching for us.

So, while we can never fully comprehend the scope of God's love, we know it extends to all people, is shaped by grace and never gives up. And because we are called to love as we have been loved, we know a good bit about our calling. It is to love everyone, even the people who seek to do us harm. It is to offer grace to others, not what they deserve, but what they need. It is never to give up on anyone, though this may be the hardest part of all. But once we realize how much love we have received from God, how can we hold back our love for anyone else?

For God so loved the world, the whole world... That is a big love, a broad love, a universal love – which is why it includes us.