

THREE QUALITIES OF GOD'S LOVE
Scripture: 1 John 4:7-21
Sermon Preached by Benjamin S. Sorensen
May 10, 2009

It is true honor and privilege to be here at Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church. I would like to thank Rev. Foster Connors, the Worship Committee and Deb Milcarek for the opportunity to be here. As I move toward completing seminary it is especially meaningful to be back here as I consider Baltimore a second home. Not only did I live here while in law school in Washington, D.C. but I also lived here from 3rd grade through 6th grade.

Would you pray with me? O God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

Today I would like to share with you three qualities of God's love and connect those with the qualities of a mother's love as today we acknowledge our mothers on Mothers' Day. In that light, would all the mothers please stand? I would also like to acknowledge my grandmother, Margaret Sorensen, who is here in spirit. Thank you.

The first quality of God's love I will touch on is the depth of God's love. As I wheezed painfully, the alveoli in my lungs trying to take in any amount of the diminished available oxygen supply, I looked at my mother who was sitting next to me chewing. It was there, as an asthmatic ten year-old that I felt a profound sense of the depth of my mother's love for me. I want to ensure you she was not eating a breakfast burrito while her son struggled to breathe. Rather she was chewing the wax of a candle in the hopes of turning it into some malleable mass that could be placed on the end of the wires protruding from my dental braces that were cutting the insides of my mouth as I labored for breath.

Our mothers love us. They love us in different ways and in different forms. A mother's love often originates in her role as life giver; the one that brings us into the world. A unique bond is forever cemented between a mother and a child and this bond begins to form early in the baby's development. In fact neonatologists say that by the beginning of the third trimester babies have developed the capability for hearing and thus begin to recognize their mother's voice and by the time of birth they readily turn towards the sound of their mother's voice. Researchers at Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio have sought to leverage this recognition of a mother's voice by child. In one study they analyzed the success rate of children aged 6 to 12 waking from various types of smoke alarms. At first, smoke alarms were fitted with the standard tone beeping and 58% of the children awoke to this alarm. Then the tone beeping was replaced with a recording of each child's mother's voice urgently encouraging the child to wake up and get out of bed. This time 96% of the children awoke. Not only did the children awake more readily, but they also more effectively performed the necessary escape procedure. In part as a result of this study, the National Fire Protection Association now allows home smoke alarms that use voice notification.¹ Therefore, I thought it might be a good idea if following the service we offer

¹ Smith, Gar A., Mark Splaingard, John R. Hayes, and Huiyun Xiang. "Comparison of a Personalized Parent Voice Smoke Alarm With a Conventional Residential Tone Smoke Alarm for Awakening Children." *Pediatrics*, Oct 2006; 118: 1623 - 1632.

instruction on how to replace songs on your iPod with a recording of your mother's voice to get you going in the morning. I am kidding, but I do want to emphasize the powerful connection between a mother and a child.

Not only is a unique bond forever created between a mother and a child but also between God and ourselves. While we must give our mothers a significant portion of the credit for the monumental task of our creation, we must also acknowledge the role God plays as our creator, the love He brings into our lives and His ability to know the uniqueness of our voice and turn towards us from the beginning.

God says in Isaiah 66 versus 12 to 13: "you shall be nursed, you shall be carried on her hip, and be trotted on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you." We each have a unique and special bond with God. Just as a mother's bond with a child is built around love so is God's bond with each of us. God's love is so vast and ultimately incomprehensible to us. God's love truly knows no bounds and is everlasting. For this reason it is so important for us to begin to appreciate the depth of His love by calling on all expressions of love which we are familiar including feminine and masculine expressions of human love. To categorize God's love as only masculine in nature or only feminine in nature is to severely limit our understanding of His love.

Therefore, the simile used in Isaiah is incredibly helpful to develop a greater appreciation of the depth of God's love. God is referred to with the pronoun "her" – "you shall be carried on her hip and be trotted on her knees." God loves us as a mother loves us, God loves us as a father loves us, God loves us how a stranger might love us, God's love is inclusive of every type of love that exists in human form and the depth of His love moves far, far beyond even that summation.

The second quality of God's love is the sacrifice of His love. Nabila Nazli was home with her children in Brooklyn, New York when a quickly moving fire began. Unable to leave the building as a result of the intensity of the flames, Nabila gathered her children in a second story bedroom. She then began dropping her month-old twins and her ten year-old son into a blanket held by neighbors below. However, in the midst of lowering her children out of the window, her five year-old daughter went back into the apartment. Upon realizing this, Nabila left the window and access to smoke free air to search for her daughter. Firefighters soon found Nabila unconscious, cradling her daughter, protecting her from the flames by using her own body as a shield. Nabila received serious burns from the flames but was able to make a full recovery as did her daughter.²

Ten year-old Umar summed up his mother's actions by saying: "she was never really that brave before. Before she was always worried about stuff like nutrition and all this boring stuff. Now she was saving our lives."

Umar is quite right; mothers often worry about the boring stuff. Mothers worry about what we are eating for lunch or who our friends are or what time we are coming home. I know this all too well. Growing up with a dietician as a mother meant peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and carrot sticks for lunch which didn't trade too well for my friends' Twinkies or fruit rollups. However, mothers worry about this boring stuff not because they have nothing better to do but as an expression of their full love for us. God just, like our mothers, is concerned about the boring stuff such as our everyday worries,

² http://assembly.state.ny.us/member_files/047/20070322/

fears and hopes but just as Umar said, God and mothers are willing to sacrifice greatly to save our physical and spiritual lives.

In verse nine and ten of our Epistle reading we hear God's love revealed to us by sending Jesus into the world and sacrificing God's only Son so that we might live through Him. In this ultimate act of sacrifice, God shows His love for us by giving His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. In Christ's deep love for mankind, He willingly suffered for his redemption: "For God so loved the world, as to give His only begotten Son; that whosoever believes in Him, may not perish, but may have life everlasting."

The third quality of God's love is the expectation of God's love. While God loves us unconditionally, God and mothers have expectations tied into their expressions of love. A first expectation of God's love is to love ourselves. Matthew 19:19 says "Honor your father and mother. Love your neighbor as yourself." To truly love anyone, including God we must first love ourselves. We must start with loving ourselves; if we cannot love ourselves it is very difficult for us to love anyone else.

However, this means loving ourselves in our own brokenness as we are each perfectly imperfect. Strive to love yourself in your own imperfection. Stretch to acknowledge your imperfection and practice loving yourself in the midst of your imperfection. Discuss with yourself what your strengths are and what are the challenges or areas for development you have. Maybe it takes you a lot longer to understand homework than it does some of your friends, or maybe others at work seem to come up with big ideas more frequently than you or maybe you haven't found the relationship you have been looking for. God loves you in the midst of these experiences that seem less than ideal.

If we are truly going to love and worship God and love those around us we must acknowledge parts of ourselves that are less than our ideal and love those parts as a loving mother would – with patience and a tender heart. Tell yourself that you are incredible, lovable person despite this aspect that you may wish were different or qualities that are not as developed. Incorporate into prayer a time of gratitude to God for your qualities, your talents and your abilities lift these up in thanks to the Lord.

In the novel The Shack, William Young follows the journey of the main protagonist Mack to an isolated shack in the woods where Mack meets three unorthodox characterizations of the Holy Trinity. At one point one of the characters reveals to Mack that "It is not love that grows, it is the knowing that grows and love simply expands to contain it. Love is the skin of knowing. When you really know someone well it is possible to really love them well."³

This is the second expectation of God's love: to know God. Just as God knows us so well, we can all do a better job of getting to know God thus enabling ourselves to love Him more. Seek God out through prayer. Seek God out through scripture. Make this seeking of your knowledge of God a daily practice. Likewise, seek to better know those we love so that we can love them even more. Through knowing them, we can not only know them better but also know ourselves better. Think about going near the shack that you might have in our own soul where fears or uncertainties or perhaps just questions you have always wondered about God, your mother or someone else who is close to you. Consider

³ Young, William P. The Shack. California, Windblown Media, 2007.

opening that door a little bit, asking a question or two to the person, seeking that answer from God, or asking for forgiveness for that act.

The third and final expectation of God's love is for us to love each other. In verse seven of our Epistle reading, John says "love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." In other words, by loving we are showing evidence of being born of God. Just as through genetics we can show ourselves as being born of our mother and father so love is a core part of God's DNA within us. Love is a uniting force between us and God and one another. 1 John verse eleven and twelve state: "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." Let us learn from the love we receive from God and from mothers, to love one another thus giving evidence everyday of God's grace. Love is what we can do for each other because of what God has done for us.

I am going to borrow the Skills and Principles of Loving from Shalom Mountain, an incredible retreat center in the Catskill Mountains that taught me much about love. More than anything else, we want to love and be loved. Love is a gift and love is not time bound. Strive to not look over or through each other but see each person in their uniqueness. Listen to what each person says. Recognize each person's right to feel and think as they do. Will each other good and not evil and be there for each other. Stay.⁴

In conclusion, please remember the depth of God's love, the sacrifice of God's love and the expectation of God's love.

I would like to close with the poem *A Mother's Love* by Helen Steiner Rice:

A Mother's love is something that no one can explain,
It is made of deep devotion and of sacrifice and pain,
It is endless and unselfish and enduring come what may
For nothing can destroy it or take that love away . . .
It is patient and forgiving when all others are forsaking,
And it never fails or falters even though the heart is breaking . . .
It believes beyond believing when the world around condemns,
And it glows with all the beauty of the rarest, brightest gems . . .
It is far beyond defining, it defies all explanation,
And it still remains a secret like the mysteries of creation . . .

⁴ <http://www.shalommountain.com/story.asp>

A many splendored miracle man cannot understand
And another wondrous evidence of God's tender guiding hand.

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