

## Love That Will Not Let Us Go

### John 3:13-21

The First Sermon by Dr. Icenogle at National  
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I think I understand a little bit of what it means to have an arranged marriage. Walking in and having every eye in the place assess me quickly. God help us all.

In the Presbyterian Church some of us have a phrase that is very important to us, it is the phrase that theology matters. When I interviewed with the committee on ministry, which is one of the hoops to go through to become a part of this congregation's ministry, it did not take long for them to get to the key theological question. Are you an Eagles' fan or a Redskin fan? I think it was the moment of hesitation that I gave that caused them even more concern. I said, neither really. I'm a Cowboys' fan. However, I was greatly relieved when they did not ask me the second most important theological question, are you a Republican or Democrat? Think about that.

Theology matters and at the heart of theology is a very important articulation that God is love. John says this frequently. Agape means that there is a piece of goodness in the presence of a loving God. There is absolutely nothing in God's character and nature that does not pour out love to us. There is no evil intent in God at all. God is not capricious, God is not vindictive, God is not controlling, God is not coercive, and God is not threatening. Love, the kind of God's love that resonates in the being of who God is always takes the initiative to reach us and never let go.

There's an eighty-year-old man who came to live in a retirement home. This story is often told by the retired president of World Vision. This man had just gotten to the retirement home and he went to his first meal in the dining hall. There was a wonderful lady seated across from him that kept staring at him, even as he ate she stared at him, finally he couldn't take any more, he said why are you staring at me? She said, oh I didn't mean to embarrass you, I'm so sorry. It's just that you look a lot like my third husband. He said, Exactly how many husbands have you had? She said, Two. That's initiative, that's a love that is committed to us before we are committed in return. That's what we celebrate in these moments of baptism, that God has loved this child from the beginning of time, God has loved these parents and God is making commitment to the child and to the parents to never let go. And part of the way that that happens is for the congregation to say we'll never let go. Theology matters.

You've probably heard what Carl Bart said when he was asked the question about how would you summarize all of theology in one sentence and he said, "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so." John 3-16 is the heart of the Gospel. This one sentence says it all. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that all who would believe in him would not perish but have eternal life.

God's love pours out upon us; God's love is reaching to you today. That is why you are in worship, even though you think you are here to hear me preach. You are really here to wonder if God's love is good for you today, and the answer is yes. Elaine Pagels, who's become famous for her resurrection of Gnosticism in the Gnostic Gospels, was interviewed recently on National Public Radio. She's a professor of religion at Princeton University. She's been concerned that so many fundamentalist and evangelical Christians use John 3-16 as the formula for whether you are in or out of the Kingdom. She said one of the reasons she left the evangelical church was people would quote this verse to her as a way of saying this is the fence and the boundary, you are either in or out, make the decision. She said, "I was so sad because I think the verse is really about the love of God, not to create fences and build boundaries. I think that's right. That's one of the reasons I'm a Presbyterian. I got so tired of being around people who wanted to build fences and boundaries but miss the centerpiece, the love of God.

Nicodemus was fascinated with this. As a Pharisee who loved to build boundaries, he was a part of a whole group of people who specialized in creating more and more laws and rules to define who was inside and

who was outside the Kingdom of God. But secretly in his heart, he wondered if it was the right way. Because you see, he went to Jesus at night. We don't go to people at night when we are trying to think out loud. We're wondering quietly in our hearts, am I doing the right thing, am I living the right kind of life. The term Pharisee means separatist. The Pharisees were so strongly separated that recent archeology has pointed out that they built catwalks around the city of Jerusalem and they lived in the penthouses at the top of all the other houses. They would walk around in the catwalks to stay away from people because if somebody touched them they'd have to go take a bath. Some of the Pharisees' homes had as many as four or five bathtubs in them. These people were serious about staying clean and separated. And Nicodemus was fascinated that Jesus would get down among the people. Jesus would come and be among ordinary people, and those ordinary people could touch him and speak to him and have access to him. This had to be somewhat frightening to Nicodemus.

Love does not come because God wants us to keep the rules. Love comes because God loves us. I'm concerned about people in the church who are more about what they are against than what they are for. There's nothing wrong with being against some things, we just made a commitment in our baptism vows that we are opposed to evil. Yes, but in order to take a solid opposition to evil, we must be firmly planted in the love of God. I'm concerned about Christians who have a cause without a sense of community and intimacy in the presence of a loving God. The Pharisees specialized in separating themselves in order to earn the love of God.

There was a whole other group of people during Jesus' time who specialized in some other ways of looking for God's love. The pagan. In his ground-breaking book, "The Rise of Christianity," Rodney Stark, Professor of Religious Sociology, says that Christians have multiplied over the ages because Christians have a superior theology. And that theology is most well defined by this phrase, "For God so loved the world." But that phrase would have puzzled the typical pagan. It puzzles the pagan of our culture today. It would puzzle them because they would have seen that statement as patently absurd. Why God isn't love, anybody knows that. The gods would demand sacrifice but never sacrifice themselves. There'd be no hint of a god making a sacrifice for mere mortal people. It is unbelievable to pagans. According to Stark and pagan theology, as in classical philosophy, mercy and pity were considered defects of character. Contrary to what justice is about; the cry for undeserving mercy would go unanswered for a pagan god. Love is an act of infants and weak gods from a pagan view.

Plato imagines the ideal society where beggars were dumped across the border of Mexico. That god is not love, god is about getting even. God is about taking over. God is about command and control. Theology of what we really think about God permeates almost everything we do. I recently saw a bumper sticker that started out with the classic statement, "To err is human, to forgive divine," but as I drove closer I saw the little print in parenthesis, "Neither of which is Marine Corps policy." Just to show that I am not against the Marines, Semper Fi! I heard it.

But we live in a world that is full of cynicism and distrust. It's not just skepticism anymore -- it's disbelief that there could be a God who could love us, a God we can trust. It's hard to accept that Jesus is unique and shows us completely the love of God. And the second part of this wonderful confessional statement is that since God loves us, we have the freedom to choose to believe, to trust, to have faith. And it's hard when we live in a culture of suspicion, and we worship God with suspicion. Isn't that how we live an awful lot of our lives: we are suspicious of the people around us. We are suspicious of the system. We don't trust anybody. If you do, you're liable to being taken for a ride to a place you don't want to go. A culture of suspicion is very reticent to believe John 3-16.

Now some of this Moses was working out in the reference that Jesus made to Nicodemus about the wilderness. Jesus recalled the moment of Exodus when people complained about miserable food. That manna, what is that stuff. That's a terrible irony: because of the people's continued complaints and their refusal to see the love of God even in front of them walking on a daily basis. God finally turns snakes loose on them. The snakes come and bite them and kill them and make them sick. But God doesn't stop there, God still wants to ply grace upon them. So he says to Moses, I want you to take the image of a snake and put it on a bronze stand and hold it high for people to see. It's as if God is saying to the people: now take a good look at yourself, you snakes, you vipers, you ones who bite at each other all the time and complain. Don't you see that I am love, that you can relax, you don't have to gnaw and be venomous. If you work on

this bronze snake, if you can take a good look at yourself and if you confess that you are like snakes, then you can see that I am a God who loves. Quit complaining. Jesus recalls to Nicodemus how God confronted the snake bitten group in the wilderness. Take a good look, people, confess your slivering ways.

And Jesus went on to teach that in a similar way, the son of man would be lifted up in the early image of the cross. The cross carries two powerful implications at this moment: the implication of what it means to look at my own venomous outpouring, that I would put Jesus on the cross and I would crucify him and I would literally tear every part of my unhappiness into his body. And the other part of the cross is that God's love is so great that he would give his Son, would sacrifice himself, and allow himself to be ripped on by ordinary human beings. Something pagans would ever understand. There is no greater love, Jesus said, than for one to lay down his life for another. Looking at Jesus on the cross, we not only see the full extent of human venom, but we see the full extent God's love. God will not walk away from us. God is saying over and over again, I love you, I am doing everything I can to get your attention, I want you to know that I am not against you. I am not bringing pain upon your life, I am the only possible way that you are going to be able to live with that pain and grace. God is love.

Several years ago, a woman came to see me, a clandestine meeting in another place besides the church. She did not want to be seen with the pastor because she was a significant woman in the community and she asked me a question, the question was simple and to the point, what sin have I committed in my life that God would give me cancer. I challenged her assumption that God was punishing her with cancer. "You see, when I was growing up as a little girl," she said, "I was in a parochial school. The teachers of that parochial school would say, if you aren't careful, if you don't do the right thing, when you grow up, God will make you get sick. So you'd better do the right thing." She said, "I can't get away from it, it's a part of the deep part of my soul, it's a sense that I've done something and God will judge me with cancer." I run into this theology way too many times. From Christians who will publicly say, God is love, and quietly think, God is getting me for past sins.

My earliest memories of childhood are about experiencing the love of God. As I tell the story, I sometimes come to tears and so I apologize if that happens. It was at a point in my life when I was no longer the favorite child because my sister had just been born. And I was out of the crib, out of my parents' room, and they put me in the room with my two older brothers, Cain and a non-repentant Abel. It's a terrible thing to be in the hands of two older brothers, who see you as a possibility of all sorts of schemes to do you in. On one occasion, they lit a match and put it in my fingers and disappeared and said to my Mom, he's lighting matches in the hallway. And it's burning down to my fingers and I'm watching it. I had a sense of terror in those days. It wasn't just about my brothers, it was the sense that I was alone in the world and I wondered if I was going to make it and we were in a place where there was a lot of difficult and dangerous sounds. At night there would be gunshots and screaming and yelling and sirens and it made me afraid. I would often comfort myself by taking my blanket and my book and going out in the rocking chair and rock myself back to sleep. One night, when a lot of the commotion was going on outside, I was overwhelmed by the sense of a gracious presence of a loving God.

Our children often sense the love of God in ways that we try to take away. When we reject the love of God, both the Numbers passage and the John passage are clear, there's only one thing left for us. And that's condemnation, but it is not that God has condemned us; it is the fact that we have condemned ourselves. There's only one positive salvation in the world and that is to engage in the love of God. That's it. If we miss that, then all we're left with is doom. That message is said over and over again in scripture. But don't blame that doom on God. God is not the source of that condemnation. We are. God will not let go of us. A husband and wife came to see me recently. They had given up on each other. The husband blamed the wife, because she never really loved him for who he was. She loved her image of him. And she blamed him because he betrayed her love by loving another woman. They complained to each other and they ranted and raved and they tried to get me to be co-opted in their relationship. How could she be so self-occupied that she never got me. How could he be so insensitive to me that he would go off with another woman? Both of them have heard the message of the love of God. Is God doing this to them? No, they are doing it to each other. God is trying to break in and speak kindly to them. But they are so preoccupied with their own pain, they can't hear it. God even tries to sustain us and be with us when we are losing touch with our own realities. We find ourselves in a life that is not creative but de-creative.

Like Nancy Reagan, and many of you, I am watching my father of 89 descend into absent presence. He holds onto a few things he can remember to give himself a sense of God's love in his life. And one of those things he holds onto are hymns. Often the person who is suffering from dementia can continue to sing the hymns. Let's not forget that. My sister will often go up to the house and play hymns for him and he will, remembering the words, sing with her. I can still see my Dad singing that song about God's love. O, love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee, I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow, may richer fuller be." He's holding onto what little bit of awareness of the love of God he can. Isn't that the way it is with all of us? We can do a lot of damage before we come to grips with the core of theology of life, which is God is love.

I hope that we learn in this church and in Presbyterian churches around the country to get our core of theology right and keep articulating that in kind and generous ways. I love your phrase, "A Ministry of Grace," because the people of this world are starving for a God of love who gives abundant grace. I commit myself in the pattern of Craig Barnes to helping you move from grace to grace. To helping you live in love. Not under condemnation. So let us hold tightly to the love that will not let us go.