

**Questions of the Cross:
LOVE**

Luke 23:26-43

How is God's love revealed in the Cross?

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
April 7, 2019

Do children really need to be loved? That seems like a preposterous question today. Of course, children especially need to be loved. That's basic to their development as human beings, or so we think.

But up until about 60 years ago, that was not the opinion of many psychologists and doctors. In fact, affection toward children was discouraged. The medical profession was still learning about the connection between bacteria and illness, and doctors noticed that children in hospitals who were handled more frequently seemed to develop more infections. So they discouraged human contact in hospital nurseries and children's wards.

The study of psychology was just getting off the ground in the 20th century, and the early theories held that too much affection made children weak and dependent. The government published pamphlets discouraging hugging and kissing your children, and an early president of the American Psychological Association said that "Mother love is a dangerous instrument." He warned that there would be serious consequences for the child who was over-kissed, which he defined as being kissed more than once a year.¹

These ideas began to change in the 1950's, due in part to the research of Harry Harlow, a psychologist who did experiments on baby Rhesus monkeys. He constructed surrogate mother models for these baby monkeys, one of wire and one of cloth, side by side. The wire mother would have a bottle for the baby, but the cloth mother didn't. Without exception, the baby monkeys would feed at the bottle on the wire mother, then cuddle and cling to the cloth mother except when it was feeding. The "attachment" was formed not by food, but by touch.

What became clear, through this and other research, is that love and affection are critically important for the development of personality. For human beings, there is no need like the need for love. It might be argued that we need love more than we need food.

Nobody shows us the character of love like Jesus Christ. Jesus is the embodiment of the unconditional love of God the Father. Last week we talked about the power of Jesus being the power of love. Jesus did not have political or economic power. He was not famous. He did not call down

legions of angels in a display of divine power. His power was the power of love. And we see the love of Jesus most powerfully in the cross.

We have been following Sam Wells' book, *Hanging By A Thread: Questions of the Cross*, through Lent. He makes a distinction between doing something *for* and doing something *with*. There is a big difference between doing something *for* somebody and doing something *with* somebody. Think of your child. Sure, you can make something for your kid to eat—a peanut butter sandwich or a batch of cookies. And he or she will probably eat whatever you put in front of them. But if you take time to involve the child in the process, they enjoy it more, they learn something, and you spend some quality time doing something together.

When I got my first car, my dad spent a morning teaching me how to maintain my car—where to check all the fluids, how to change the oil, how to check the air pressure in the tires and how to change a tire if I needed to. My dad loved me enough that he would have done all that for me. But as it was, he did it *with* me. I learned how to do it, and we had a good morning together. That is still a good memory for me. And I can still change the oil on a 1975 Oldsmobile!

“Being with” is a big part of our youth mission experiences. Michael could take a gang of teenagers somewhere and they could clear up debris or paint a house or put on a roof, and I'm sure the homeowners would still be grateful. But what they try to do is to work *with* the homeowners in whatever project they are doing. That way the youth get to form relationships with the people they are serving, and the people get to know the faith of our young people. Often lives are changed by that interaction.

Doing *for* can actually create barriers between people, because one is superior to another. Doing *with* builds relationships and allows for love to grow on a level playing field.

Much of Christian thought has seen the cross as something God did *for* us. God sent Jesus to the cross to make a sacrifice that would appease God's sense of justice and put us back in a right relationship with God. God gave God's own Son to defeat the powers of sin, evil, and death which we could not defeat on our own. This is God doing *for* us.

Sam Wells writes, “But this drives a wedge between the God we see revealed in Christ in the Gospels, the God who identifies with us, walks with us, inhabits our green pastures, still waters, places of danger, and asks us to walk with him to Jerusalem, to Calvary, to the cross—and the God who fixes our problem with sin and death” *for us*.²

God’s story is all about God being *with* us. Jesus’ birth name, Emmanuel, means “God is with us.” The crucifixion of Jesus shows the radical resistance of human beings to God being with us, yet it also shows the radical willingness of God to go to any length to be with us regardless.³

We see this paradox most clearly in the responses of the two criminals crucified with Jesus. Only Luke develops this part of the story. The first criminal joins in the derision of the crowd and says, “*Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!*”⁴ He doesn’t understand the kind of power that Jesus is showing at that very moment. To him, Jesus fails to do *for* him what he needs done.

The second criminal rebukes the first and has a very different request, “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*”⁵ First, that is an acknowledgment of the power of Jesus, that he does have a kingdom coming. Second, it is not a request for Jesus to do anything for him, but a request to be with Jesus wherever he is going. Jesus—broken, beaten, bloody, gasping for breath—replies, “*Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.*”⁶

Sam Wells writes, “Being *with* is what it [is] all about. God being *with* us is what creation, exodus, covenant, and cross are all about. Being *with* is what eternity is all about. And you don’t have to wait forever for it: you can have it today. The suffering of the cross can’t take it away from you. The depth of your failure and folly ...can’t deprive you of it. The barrier of death is not stronger than its power. Being *with* is paradise. And you can have it today.”⁷

The radical, unconditional nature of God’s love is not going to let you go, no matter how you fight against it.

Rick and Heidi Salomon decided several years ago that they wanted to adopt a child. In a magazine from the adoption agency, Heidi saw a boy from Romania, and she told Rick, “I think that’s our son.” A few months

later, they adopted Daniel. He was seven years old. He had spent the first seven years of his life in a crib in a Romanian orphanage with another boy his age. Except for eating and going to the bathroom, he never left the crib. He had no motor skills, couldn't read, knew no games or stories or songs, and had no conception of family.

Within months of being in the United States in the Salomon's home, Daniel grew into a monster—defiant, anti-social, violent, full of rage. Psychiatrists diagnosed him with “attachment disorder,” unable to have normal relationships with his parents because he missed that part of his development as an infant. Having never been loved, being loved drove him crazy.

For years, Heidi and Rick tried to help Daniel. Every sort of therapy failed. They were exhausted, and their marriage was a shambles. Still Heidi would not give up. She said, “I couldn't; he was my kid.”

Finally the Salomons encountered a psychiatrist who specialized in attachment disorders. They basically took Daniel back to his infancy to reintroduce him to the concept of family. If he acted out, his punishment was not “time out,” but “time in,” not isolation, but more interaction with his parents. They would hold this big pre-teen boy in their laps for hours, making eye contact and touching and feeding him ice cream with a spoon.

It was weird, but it worked. Daniel began to be peaceful. He seemed to realize his parents weren't so bad after all. He began to help out around the house. He made some friends at school. They took him to synagogue, where he had been kicked out before, now without incident.

When Daniel was 13, he was the valedictorian of his confirmation class. To accept the award, he had to make a speech to the congregation. Heidi and Rick were in the audience. He talked about life in Romania and the struggles he had been through in America. Near the end of his speech, Daniel began to shake with emotion. He said, “Before I finish, I would like to thank two people, my mom and my dad. The reason I am here today, and the kind of person I am today, is because of you. Mom,” and Daniel paused to get his emotions under control, “I can never thank you enough for all the places you have taken me to. Even when I absolutely refused to go, I somehow had fun when I got there. Dad, you're one heck of a guy, to put

up with a crazy family like this. You guys are both amazing. I love you very much.” Heidi said it was, without a doubt, the most spectacular moment of her life.⁸

That kind of love is not sentimental or shallow or romantic. That kind of love is tough, gritty, no-nonsense, determined, and stubborn. It’s the kind of love that will never give up on being *with*. It’s like the love that took Jesus to the cross. It’s the love that could allow Jesus to look out on the crowd of people who were spitting on him and screaming at him and soldiers who had beaten him and nailed him to the cross and say, “*Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*”⁹ It’s the love that could extend grace to a dying thief next to him on a cross. It’s the love that can offer forgiveness and extend grace to you and to me.

Years ago, there was a big veterans’ celebration and parade in Chicago. Part of the commemoration was a mobile version of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. Like the original, it bore the names of all the soldiers who had died in Vietnam. A newscaster reporting on the scene asked a vet why he had come all the way to Chicago to visit this memorial and to participate in the parade. The soldier looked straight into the face of the reporter and with tears flowing down his cheeks said, "Because of this man right here." As the soldier talked, he was pointing to the name of a friend that was etched in the wall. He traced the letters of his friend's name. The soldier continued to say to the reporter, "This man right here gave his life for me. He gave his life for me." As the tears rolled down his face, he kept tracing the name of his friend with his finger.¹⁰

If someone were to ask us today, “Why are you here?” we might trace the cross that’s printed on our bulletin, or hold the cross that hangs around our neck, or point to the cross that hangs above us on the wall, and say, “Because of this man right here.” Why are we here? Because God is with us in Jesus. Because God is with us in the cross. Because God is with us as we retrace the story leading up to Easter. Because God is with us as we remember him in the bread and the cup.

This is how we know that we are loved unconditionally and forever. God is with us. We need nothing more.

¹ “This American Life” podcast #317, “Unconditional Love.” March 10, 2019.

² Samuel Wells, *Hanging By A Thread: Questions of the Cross* (New York: Church Publications, 2016), 53f.

³ Wells, 54.

⁴ Luke 23:39.

⁵ Luke 23:42.

⁶ Luke 23:43.

⁷ Wells, 55.

⁸ “This American Life” podcast #317, “Unconditional Love.” March 10, 2019.

32:47-33:33.

⁹ Luke 23:34.

¹⁰ Lee Eclov, "Blasphemy!" *PreachingToday.com*.